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THE LAST 'SPECIAL ISSUE' ON RACE

INTRODUCTION: DE MARGIN AND DE CENTRE

Film culture in the '80s has been marked by volatile reconfigurations in the relations of 'race' and representation. Questions of cultural difference, identity and otherness – in a word, ethnicity – have been thrown into the foreground of contestation and debate by numerous shifts and developments. Within the British context, these trends have underpinned controversies around recent independent films like *Handsworth Songs*, *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *The Passion of Remembrance* – films which have elicited critical acclaim and angry polemic in roughly equal measure. The fragmented state of the nation depicted from a black British point of view in the films themselves contradicts (literally, speaks against) the remythification of the colonial past in mainstream movies such as *Gandhi* or *A Passage to India*; yet, the wave of popular films set in imperial India or Africa also acknowledge, in their own way, Britain's post-colonial condition in so far as they speak to contemporary concerns. The competing versions of narrative, memory and history in this conjuncture might be read symptomatically as a state of affairs that speaks of – articulates – conflicting identities within the 'imagined community' of the nation.

In the international context, certain moments and trends suggest further shifts, adjustments, in the articulation of ethnicity as ideology. The ratings success-story of *The Cosby Show* – 'number one' in South Africa as well as the United States – has fulfilled the innocent demand for 'positive images' with a (neo-conservative) vengeance. And the very idea of a Hollywood director like Steven Spielberg adapting the Alice Walker novel *The Color Purple* (in the context of the

unprecedented publication of black women writers) still seems extraordinary, however commercially astute. In addition, the widening circulation of Third World films among Western audiences, or the televisual 'presence' of Third World spaces like Ethiopia *via* events such as Live Aid in 1985, implies something of a shift within the boundaries that differentiated the First and Third Worlds.

One issue at stake, we suggest, is the potential break-up or deconstruction of structures that determine what is regarded as culturally central and what is regarded as culturally marginal. Ethnicity has emerged as a key issue as various 'marginal' practices (black British film, for instance) are becoming de-marginalised at a time when 'centred' discourses of cultural authority and legitimisation (such as notions of a trans-historical artistic 'canon') are becoming increasingly de-centred and destabilised, called into question from within. This scenario, described by Craig Owens as a crisis, 'specifically of the authority vested in Western European culture and its institutions'¹, has of course already been widely discussed in terms of the characteristic aesthetic and political problems of postmodernism. However, it is ironic that while some of the loudest voices offering commentary have announced nothing less than the 'end of representation' or the 'end of history', the political possibility of the *end of ethnocentrism* has not been seized upon as a suitably exciting topic for descrip-

¹ Craig Owens, 'The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Post-Modernism' in Hal Foster (ed), *Postmodern Culture*, London, Pluto, 1985, p 57.

tion or inquiry². We would argue, on the contrary, that critical theories are just *beginning* to recognise and reckon with the kinds of complexity inherent in the culturally constructed nature of ethnic identities, and the implications this has for the analysis of representational practices.

We chose to call this the 'last special issue' as a rejoinder to critical discourses in which the subject of race and ethnicity is still placed on the margins conceptually, despite the acknowledgement of such issues indicated by the proliferation of 'special issues' on race in film, media and literary journals.³ The problem, paradoxically, is that as an editorial strategy and as a mode of address, the logic of the 'special issue' tends to reinforce, rather than ameliorate, the perceived otherness and marginality of the subject itself. There is nothing intrinsically different or 'special' about ethnicity in film culture, merely that it makes fresh demands on existing theories, methods and problematics. Rather than attempt to compensate the 'structured absences' of previous paradigms, it would be useful to identify the relations of power/knowledge that determine which cultural issues are intellectually prioritised in the first place. The initial stage in any deconstructive project must be to examine and undermine the force of the binary relation that produces the marginal as a consequence of the authority invested in the centre.

At a concrete level the politics of marginalisation is an underlying issue in the overview of black film-making in Europe sketched by Maureen Blackwood and June Givanni. The negotiation of access to resources in training, production and distribution emerges as a common factor facing practitioners in a migrant or 'minority' situation. While highlighting the different conditions stem-

ming from the colonial past, the comparative dimension also draws attention to the specificity of British conditions in the present, where black film-making has flourished in the state-subsidised 'independent' sector. Data compiled by June Givanni elsewhere⁴ indicates some of the characteristics 'that constitute black British film as a 'minor' cinema: the prevalence of material of short duration, shot on video, and in the documentary genre, indicates a pattern of underfunding, or rather, taking the variety of work into consideration, a considerable cultural achievement that has been won against the odds of meagre resourcing. Moreover, shifts in the institutional framework of public funding in the UK were brought about in the '80s as a result of a wider social and political struggle to secure black rights to representation. It was said at the time of the 1981 'riots' that this was the only way in which those excluded from positions of power and influence could make themselves heard: in any case, the events were read and widely understood as expressing protest at the structural marginalisation of the black presence in British public institutions.

The consequent demand for *black representation* thus informed shifts in multicultural and 'equal opportunity' policy among institutions such as Channel Four, the British Film Institute and local authorities such as the Greater London Council. More generally, this took place in the context of a re-articulation of the category 'black' as a political term of identification among diverse minority communities of Asian, African and Caribbean origin, rather than as a biological or 'racial' category. Together, these aspects of the cultural politics of 'black representation' informed the intense debates on aesthetic and cinematic strategies within the black British independent sector. Far from homogenising these differences, the concept has been the site of contestation, highlighted in numerous events and conferences, such as 'Third Film Cinema' at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in 1986 and more recently, the conference on 'Black Film/British Cinema' at the

² The assertion of the 'end' of everything is exemplified in Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, New York, Semiotext(e), 1984 and Victor Burgin, *The End of Art Theory*, London, Macmillan, 1986. More considered reflections on postmodernism, which focus on the problems of its ethnocentrism, are offered by Stuart Hall, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview edited by Lawrence Grossberg', in *Communications Inquiry*, vol 10 no 2, 1986 (University of Iowa) and Andreas Huyssens, 'Mapping the Post-Modern', in *After The Great Divide*, London, Macmillan, 1987.

³ For instance, 'Black Experiences', *Ten-8*, no 22, 1986; 'Race, Writing and Difference', *Critical Inquiry*, vol 12 no 3, 1985 and vol 13 no 1, 1986; 'The Inappropriate Other', *Discourse*, no 8, 1986; 'Colonialism', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 9, 1987 and 'The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse', I and II, *Cultural Critique*, Spring and Fall, 1987.

⁴ *Black and Asian Film List*, compiled by June Givanni and edited by Nicky North, London, British Film Institute Education, 1988. A transatlantic comparison is offered by James A Sneed, 'Black Independent Film: Britain and America' in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film/British Cinema*, ICA Document 7/British Film Institute Production Special, 1988.

4 Institute of Contemporary Arts in London.⁵ It has become apparent that what is at stake in the debates on 'black representation' is not primarily a dispute over realist or modernist principles, but a broader problematic in cultural politics shaped, as Paul Gilroy suggests, by the tension between representation as a practice of depiction and representation as a practice of delegation.⁶ Representational democracy, like the classic realist text, is premised on an implicitly mimetic theory of representation as correspondence with the 'real': notionally, the political character of the state is assumed to 'correspond' to the aspiration of the masses in society. However, not unlike the civil disruptions, aspects of the new wave in black British film-making have interrupted these relations of representation: in cinematic terms the challenge to documentary realism that features so prominently in more recent work, such as *Territories*, is predicated on a relational conception of representation as a practice of selection, combination and articulation. At a textual level, such shifts have contested the hegemony of documentary realism underlying the formal codification of what Jim Pines calls the master discourse of the 'race-relations narrative'.⁷ This also entails awareness of extra-textual factors, such as funding, as important determinants on black film-making and its modes of enunciation, such as 'the moral imperative which usually characterises black films, which empowers them to speak with a sense of urgency', as John Akomfrah of Black Audio Film Collective has put it.⁸

⁵ Symposia organised by the Greater London Council in 1985 are documented in *Third Eye: Struggles for Black and Third World Cinema*, Race Equality Unit, London, GLC 1986; the Edinburgh conference is documented in Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (eds), *Third Cinema: Theories and Practices*, London, BFI (forthcoming); and the ICA conference is documented in Kobena Mercer (ed), op cit.

⁶ 'Nothing But Sweat inside my Hand: Diaspora Aesthetics and Black Arts in Britain', in Kobena Mercer (ed), op cit. See also Pierre Bourdieu, 'Delegation and Political Fetishism', *Thesis Eleven* no 10/11, 1984-85 (Sydney), pp 56-70.

⁷ See Jim Pines, 'The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema', in Mbye Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, Celebration of Black Cinema, Inc/MIT Press 1988 and Kobena Mercer, 'Disapora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain', in *ibid*.

⁸ In Paul Gilroy and Jim Pines, 'Handsworth Songs: Audiences/Aesthetics/Independence, An Interview with Black Audio Film Collective', *Framework* no 35, 1988, p 11.

What is at issue in this problematic is the question of power, as Judith Williamson argues in her review of *The Passion of Remembrance*, 'The more power any group has to create and wield representations, the less it is required to *be* representative'.⁹ Where access and opportunities are rationed, so that black films tend to get made only one-at-a-time, each film text is burdened with an inordinate pressure to be 'representative' and to act, like a delegate does, as a statement that 'speaks' for the black communities as a whole. Martina Attille, producer of the film, suggests that the 'sense of urgency to say it all' stems less from the artistic choices made by black filmmakers and more from the material constraints in which 'sometimes we only get the *one* chance to make ourselves heard'.¹⁰ Contemporary shifts have brought these problems into view, for as Williamson adds, in relation to the invisible demand to be 'representative' implicit in the rationing and rationalisation of public funding, 'what is courageous in Sankofa's project is that they have chosen to speak *from*, but not *for*, black experience(s) in Britain'.

Marginality circumscribes the enunciative modalities of black film as cinematic discourse and imposes a double bind on black subjects who speak in the public sphere: if only *one* voice is given the 'right to speak', that voice will be heard, by the majority culture, as 'speaking for' the *many* who are excluded or marginalised from access to the means of representation. This of course underlines the problem of tokenism: the very idea that a single film could 'speak for' an entire community of interests reinforces the perceived secondariness of that community. The double bind of expedient inclusion as a term for the legitimisation of more general forms of exclusionary practice is also the source of a range of representational problems encountered not just by black subjects, but by other groups marginalised into minority status. In the gay documentary *Word is Out* (Mariposa Film Group, 1978) the nature of this problematic is pointed out in a performative mode by a black woman who carefully describes the predicament she is placed in as a result of the editing strategy of the text:

⁹ *New Statesman*, December 5, 1986.

¹⁰ In 'The Passion of Remembrance: Background and Interview with Sankofa', *Framework* no 32/33, 1986, p 101.

*What I was trying to say when I asked you if I would be the only black lesbian in the film is: do you know we come in all shapes and colours and directions to our lives? Are you capturing that on the film? As a black lesbian-feminist involved in the movement, so often people try to put me in the position of speaking for all black lesbians. I happen to be a black lesbian among many, and I wouldn't want to be seen as this is how all black lesbians are.*¹¹

Within such a regime of representation, the restricted economy of ethnic enunciation is a political problem for at least two important reasons. First, individual subjectivity is denied because the black subject is positioned as a mouth-piece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be 'typified' by its representative. Acknowledgement of the *diversity* of black experiences and subject-positions is thereby foreclosed. Thus, secondly, where minority subjects are framed and contained by the monologic terms of 'majority discourse', the fixity of boundary relations between centre and margin, universal and particular, returns the speaking subject to the ideologically appointed place of the stereotype – that 'all black people are the same'.

Stuart Hall's account of the shifts taking place in contemporary black British cultural production offers a means of making sense of the 'politics of representation' at issue here. His argument that current shifts demand the recognition of the 'end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject' enables us to analyse and unpack the burden of racial representation. The recognition that 'black' is a politically and culturally constructed category, and that our metaphorical fictions of 'white' and 'black' are not fixed by Nature but by historical formations of hegemony, brings into play 'the recognition of the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experiences of black subjects'. This has major consequences for the critical evaluation of different aesthetic and discursive strategies that articulate race at the level of language and representation.

Films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessarily right-on by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience. Once you enter the politics of the end of the

*essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism. You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject.*¹²

The deconstruction of binary relations thus entails the relativisation and rearticulation of 'ethnicity'. This is an importantly *enabling* argument as it brings a range of critical issues into an explanatory structure, however tentative.

At one level, it contextualises Salman Rushdie's point, expressed in his polemic against *Handsworth Songs*¹³, that 'celebration makes us lazy'. Because black films have been so few and far between, up till now, there has been a tendency to 'celebrate' the fact that they ever got made at all; but this has inhibited the formulation of criticism and self-criticism and perpetuated the moral masochism of 'correctness' so pervasive in oppositional 'left' cultural politics (especially in Britain). Judith Williamson takes up this point and argues that the moralism of being ideologically 'right-on' has been conflated with aesthetic judgement and thus the formal properties of the recent 'experimental' films have been subsumed into their 'blackness' (that is, the racial identity of the authors) giving the films an 'aura of untouchability' that further pre-empts critical analysis. The problem which arises, is that such responses threaten to frame the films as merely replacing the avant-garde (as the 'latest thing') rather than as displacing the orthodoxies that have led the Euro-American vanguard (especially its formalist variant) into its current stasis. At another level, Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap argues that the debates on black British film have in turn made Asian experiences and interventions 'secondary', thus risking the replication of essentialist versions of race precisely when the rearticulation of subaltern ethnicities as 'black' seeks to undermine the 'ethnic absolutism' (anchoring the culturalist terms of the 'new racism' that fixes hybridised ex-

¹¹ In Nancy Adair and Casey Adair (eds), *Word is Out: Stories of Some of Our Lives*, New York, New Glide/Delta, 1978, p 203.

¹² Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op cit. See also, Stuart Hall, 'Minimal Selves', in Lisa Appignanesi (ed), *Identity*, ICA Document 6, 1988, pp 44-46.

¹³ 'Songs Doesn't Know The Score', *The Guardian*, January 12, 1987, reprinted in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op cit.

6 periences in terms of alien cultures'¹⁴. Coco Fusco's assessment of two major conferences in the US examines the way in which two kinds of essentialist tendency, manifest in the contradictory reception of black British film, mutually forestall the politics of criticism. The impetus to 'celebrate' black cinema, on the one hand, invokes a unitary notion of blackness that precludes elucidation of 'internal' differences and diversity. The desire to 'correct' the omissions of the past within the Western avant-garde, on the other hand, has led to a one-sided fixation with ethnicity as something that 'belongs' to the Other alone, thus white ethnicity is not under question and retains its 'centred' position; more to the point, the white subject remains the central reference point in the power ploys of multicultural policy. The burden of representation thus falls on the Other, because as Fusco argues, 'to ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it'.

While such discursive events acknowledge contemporary shifts, their logic evades the implications of Hall's insight that the point of contestation is no longer between multiculturalism and anti-racism, but *inside* the concept of ethnicity itself. Within dominant discourses, 'ethnicity' is structured into a negative equivalence with essentialist versions of 'race' and 'nation' which particularise its referent, as the pejorative connotation of 'ethnic minority' implies (*who*, after all, constitutes the 'ethnic majority'?). On the other hand, just as it was necessary to re-appropriate the category 'black', Hall argues that 'ethnicity' is a strategically *necessary* concept because it

*acknowledges the place of history, language and culture in the construction of subjectivity and identity, as well as the fact that all discourse is placed, positioned, situated, and all knowledge is contextual. Representation is possible only because enunciation is always produced within codes that have a history, a position within the discursive formations of a particular space and time.*¹⁵

In this sense, 'we are all *ethnically* located', but the

cultural specificity of white ethnicity has been rendered 'invisible' by the epistemic violence that has, historically, disavowed difference in Western discourses. The rearticulation of ethnicity as an epistemological category thus involves,

The displacement of the centred discourses of the West (and) entails putting into question its universalist character and its transcendental claims to speak for everyone, while being itself everywhere and nowhere.

Richard Dyer's article, 'White', inaugurates a paradigmatic shift by precisely registering the re-orientation of 'ethnicity' that Hall's argument calls for. Dyer shows how elusive white ethnicity is as a representational construct (and the difficulties this presents for constituting it as a theoretical object of analysis) and notes that, 'Black is, in the realm of categories, always marked as a colour . . . is always particularising; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything'. In other words, whiteness has secured universal consent to its hegemony as the 'norm' by masking its coercive force with the invisibility that marks off the Other (the pathologised, the disempowered, the dehumanised) as all too visible – 'coloured'.¹⁶ Significantly, in relation to the films that Dyer discusses, whiteness only tends to become visible when its hegemony is under contestation.

The complex range of problems now coming into view in film studies around the site of ethnicity, partly as a result of developments elsewhere in literary and social theory¹⁷, enables a more ade-

¹⁶ The term 'people of colour' operates in the US as a political term analogous to 'black' in the British context. In both instances, such terms have engendered intense semantic ambiguity and ideological anxiety as the racial mythology of 'colour' is put *under erasure*, cancelled out but still legible, in a deconstructive logic that depends on the same system of metaphorical equivalences and differences. Semantic indeterminacy as a condition of political contestation is discussed in Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London, Verso, 1985.

¹⁷ See Stuart Hall, 'Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance', in *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris, UNESCO, 1980; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978, and *The World, The Text and the Critic*, London, Faber, 1984; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, London, Methuen, 1987; Cornel West, 'The Dilemma of a Black Intellectual', *Cultural Critique*, vol 1, no 1, 1986; 'Race and Social Theory', in M Davis, M Marrable, F Pfel and M Sprinker (eds), *The Year Left 2*, London, Verso, 1987 and 'Marxist Theory and the Specificity of Afro-American Oppression', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1988.

¹⁴ Discursive formations of British racism are discussed in Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, London, Hutchinson, 1987. Gilroy proposes the concept of syncretism to examine cultural resistance in the 'hybridised' context of black Britain, see especially chapter 5, 'Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism'.

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in Kobena Mercer (ed), *Black Film/British Cinema*, op cit.

quate understanding of contemporary forms of contestation. The 'differences' between various black independent film practices have, to some extent, been overplayed, as the key underlying objective across each of the strategies, is to displace the binary relation of the burden of representation, most clearly pinpointed by Horace Ove:

*Here in England there is a danger, if you are black, that all you are allowed to make is films about black people and their problems. White film-makers on the other hand, have a right to make films about whatever they like.*¹⁸

Theoretically, the displacement of binarisms has been most important in the analysis of stereotyping – the marginalisation of ethnicity has been held in place by the logical impasse of the 'positive/negative' image polarity. *Screen* has contributed to the productive displacement of this stasis in a number of ways: from Steve Neale's analysis of the impossibility of the 'perfect image' sought by idealist and realist arguments, to Homi Bhabha's influential reading of colonial discourse, which emphasises the psychic ambivalence, the fear and fascination, that informs the 'Manichean delirium' of classical regimes of racial representation.¹⁹ However, the range of textual readings here suggests that we need to go much further towards a reflexive examination of the mutual inscription of self and other in the analysis of ethnic boundary-ness. This involves questioning the way that, during its 'centred' role in the discursive formation of film theory during the 1970s, *Screen* participated in a phase of British left culture that inadvertently marginalised race and ethnicity as a consequence of the centrifugal tendency of its 'high theory'.

During this period, one was more likely to encounter the analysis of racial stereotyping in sociology than cultural theory, where class and gender took precedence in debates on ideology and

subjectivity.²⁰ Furthermore, without imputing maleficent intentions (because such relations are beyond the control of individual intentionality), it can be said that even within *Screen*'s important acknowledgement of ethnic difference in previous 'special issues'²¹, the explanatory concept of 'otherness' distances and particularises ethnicity as something that happens far away, either in the US or in the Third World.²² Space prohibits an adequate exploration of the intellectual milieu that *Screen* helped to form, but recent comments on the institutionalisation of film studies have argued that 'Screen theory', so-called, came to function as a kind of corporate 'name of the father', a 'theoretical super-ego' or even a 'phallic mother' – a centred point of reference that, like a doctrine or orthodoxy, featured a number of 'disciplinary' characteristics.²³ Jane Gaines recalls that, in the translation of 'Screen theory' into the North American academic environment in the '70s, leftist enthusiasm for theoretical 'correctness' was heard to speak in an unmistakably English accent.

This background is important because what emerges in the current situation is not a 'new'

²⁰ In both Weberian and Marxist variants, see Charles Husband, *White Media and Black Britain*, London, Arrow 1975 and Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis*, London, Macmillan, 1978. Cultural struggles over media racism are documented in Phil Cohen and Carl Gardner (eds), *It Ain't Half Racist, Mum*, London, Comedia/Campaign Against Racism in the Media, 1982. CARM's BBC Open Door programme is discussed in Stuart Hall, 'The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media', in Bridges and Brunt (eds) *Silver Linings*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1981.

²¹ 'Racism, Colonialism and the Cinema', *Screen* March-April 1983, vol 24 no 2, and 'Other Cinemas, Other Criticisms', *Screen* May-August 1985, vol 26 nos 3-4.

²² Black British perspectives have rarely featured in *Screen*, but see Hazel Carby, 'Multiculture', *Screen Education* Spring 1980, no 34, pp 62-70; Paul Gilroy, 'C4 – Bridgehead or Bantustan?', *Screen* July-October 1983, vol 24 no 4-5, pp 130-136; Robert Cruz, 'Black Cinemas, Film Theory and Dependent Knowledge', *Screen* May-August 1985, vol 26 nos 3-4, pp 152-156.

²³ The description of a 'theoretical super ego' in film studies is made by Paul Willemen in 'An Avant-Garde for the 80s', *Framework* no 24, 1982 and in 'The Third Cinema Question: Notes and Reflections', *Framework* no 34, 1987. The characterisation of orthodoxies in terms of the demands of a 'phallic mother' is made by Lesley Stern in her tribute, 'Remembering Claire Johnston', in *FilmNews* vol 19 no 4, May 1988 (Sydney), reprinted in *Framework* no 35, 1988. An interesting case of another translation this time in the post-colonial periphery, is provided by Felicity Collins, 'The Australian Journal of Screen Theory', in *Framework* no 24, 1982.

¹⁸ Interview with Sylvia Paskin, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, vol 54, no 647, December 1987.

¹⁹ Steve Neale, 'The Same Old Story: Stereotypes and Difference', *Screen Education* Autumn-Winter 1979-80, nos 32-33, pp 33-37 and Homi K Bhabha, 'The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp. 18-36.

problematic, but a critical *return* to issues unwittingly 'repressed' in some of the 'old' problematics and debates. It would be useful, therefore, to tentatively draw out some of the directions in which the field is being remapped and in which the *lacunae* of previous paradigms are excavated.

First, the analysis of ethnic binarisms at the level of narrative codes returns to the question of how dominant ideologies naturalise their domination, underlying previous debates on the classic realist text. Clyde Taylor's intertextual examination of racialised repetition across two 'epic' Hollywood films suggests that the ethnic iconography that drives the reproduction of racist ideology is not simply indicative of capitalist commodification or a bourgeois world view. *Star Wars*, argues Taylor, repeats the 'blood and purity' mythology of *The Birth of a Nation*, not as a defiant assertion of WASP 'superiority' but as an embattled recoding of the master text in response to the encroaching presence of the Third World. The racial discourse sub-textualised by binary oppositions acknowledges the crises of (US) hegemony. The 'liberal' inflections in the films discussed by Richard Dyer also acknowledge the destabilisation of prevailing race relations, albeit within a different set of generic and narrative conventions. Common to both readings is a concern to 'typify' textual structures that position racial and ethnic signifiers in the fixed relation of a binary opposition, whether it be one of antagonism, accommodation or subordination.

There is, in addition, a historical emphasis that relativises the kinds of claims once extrapolated from the formal structures of the 'CRT', as it was known. Aspects of Bhabha's theorisation of the stereotype in colonial discourse replicate this trans-historical or de-historicised emphasis.²⁴ The move towards a more context-oriented view, on the other hand, indicates that although dominant discourses are characterised by closure, they are not themselves closed but constantly negotiated and restructured by the conjuncture of discourses in which they are produced. The way in which ethnic 'types' are made afresh in contemporary movies like *An Officer and A Gentleman* and *Angel Heart* – or more generally in current

advertising – demands such a conjunctural approach. The theory of the stereotype cannot be abandoned as it also needs to be able to explain how and why certain ethnic stereotypes are at times recirculated, in the British context, in the work of black film and television authors.²⁵

Secondly, there is a note of caution about reproducing binarisms at the level of theory. Cameron Bailey's reading of the accretion of 'ethnic' signifiers around the construction of (white) femininity as a source of pleasure and danger in *Something Wild* demonstrates that, rather than the familiar 'race, class, gender' mantra, analysis needs to take account of the intersections of differences, in particular of the representation of sexuality as a recurring site upon which categories of race and gender intersect. Feminist theories of the fetishistic logic inherent in the sexualisation of gender-difference have provided an invaluable inventory for the reading of the eroticised othering of the black (male and female) subject. Yet, as Jane Gaines argues, the gender binarism implicit in the heterosexist presumption so often unwittingly reproduced in feminist film theory (or FFT; the acronym already indicates an orthodoxy) remains 'colour blind' to the racial hierarchies that structure master over the 'look'. The scenario voyeurism, sadism and the objectification played out across Diana Ross' star image in *Mahogany* enacts a patriarchal discourse of masculine 'desire', but also demands a historical understanding of the pre-textual and the contextual discourses of race that placed the black woman in the 'paradox of non-being' – a reference to the period in Afro-American history when the black female did not signify 'woman' on account of the racial ideology that made the black subject less than human.

The historical violation of black bodies in social formations structured by slavery gives rise to a discourse (encoded in both the rationalisation of and resistance to such pre-modern forms of power as lynching) which has indeed the countervailing force to rival the problematic of castration rhetorically placed at the centre of psychoanalytic theory

²⁴ Methods employed by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are the subject of a critique by Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 9, 1987.

²⁵ An issue raised in Jim Pines' reading of sociological stereotypes in Horace Ove's *Pressure* (1975), discussed in 'Blacks in Films, The British Angle', *Multiracial Education* vol 9, no 2, 1981. Some of the paradoxical consequences of documentary realism in black independent film are also discussed in Kobena Mercer, 'Recoding Narratives of Race and Nation', in *Black Film/British Cinema*, op cit.

by the Oedipal grand narrative. Just as lesbian critiques of FFT have questioned the explanatory capacity of Freudian and Lacanian theory to account for the inscription of female pleasure and desire²⁶ – demonstrating the contradictory subject positions occupied by different spectators – the reorientation of the spectatorship problematic in the articles by Gaines and Manthia Diawara identifies the ethnocentrism of psychoanalytic discourse as a barrier to further inquiry. Both question the universalist claims anchored in the Oedipus story and imply that uncritical adherence to psychoanalytic theory (however enabling as a method) risks the disavowal of its Eurocentric ‘authority’; Freud closes his essay on fetishism by commenting that the acknowledgement and disavowal of difference ‘might be seen in the Chinese custom of mutilating the female foot and then revering it like a fetish after it has been mutilated’²⁷ – surely this culture-bound aesthetic judgement is the starting point for a more circumspect appropriation of psychoanalytic theory.

Diawara identifies the mythic ‘castration’ and ‘visual punishment’ of the black male as a term of the ‘narrative pleasures’ offered by Hollywood spectacle (and also as a narratological term of closure, analogous to the ‘punishment’ of feminine transgression in *film noir*). By raising the issue of spectatorial resistance, Diawara opens up an interesting question about the place of the black spectator in the ideological machinery of interpellation. How is the black subject sutured into a place that includes it only as a term of negation? *What* does the black spectator identify with when his/her mirror image is structurally absent or present only as Other? In the past, it was assumed that all social subjects acceded to the narcissistic pleasure of the ‘mirror phase’ in their misrecognition of themselves as the subject of enunciation, returned thus as normalised and passified ‘subjects’ of ideological subjection (this was the basis of Barthes’ distinction between ‘pleasure’ and ‘bliss’²⁸). But what if certain social categories of spectator do not

have access, as it were, to the initial moment of *recognition*? The question of how black subjects psychically manage to make identifications with white images is thus signposted as an important area for further inquiry.²⁹ Perhaps one reason why, for example, *The Cosby Show* is so popular among black audiences is that it affords the pleasure of a basic or primary narcissism even though it interpellates the minority subject, in particular, into ideological normalisation.³⁰ A contemporary black star, like Eddie Murphy – popular with both white and black audiences – offers another source of ‘bad pleasure’, partly on account of the pastiche of the stereotype that he performs in his star-image as the street-credible, but ideologically unthreatening, macho loudmouth.

This is also where class comes back into the calculation of difference. An appreciation of differentiated regimes of racial representation necessitates acknowledgement of different audiences or, taken together, recognition of the different forms of ideological articulation characteristic of First and Second Cinemas, as described by the concept of Third Cinema.³¹ The inscription of ethnic indeterminacy does not take place ‘inside’ the text, as if it were hermetically sealed, but in-between the relations of author, text and reader specific to the construction of different discursive formations. Blackness is not always a sign of racial codification (as the term *film noir* admits): its representational aura in auteurist and avant-garde traditions conventionally serves to mark off the status of the author (as white subject of enun-

²⁶ See Jackie Stacey, ‘Desperately Seeking Difference’, *Screen* Winter 1987, vol 28 no 1, pp 48–61; reprinted in a slightly different version in Lorraine Gamman and Margaret Marshment (eds), *The Female Gaze*, London, The Women’s Press, 1988.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, ‘Fetishism’, in *On Sexuality*, Harmondsworth, Pelican Freud Library vol 7, 1977, p 357.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, New York, Hill and Wang 1975.

²⁹ This again is by no means a ‘new’ topic. The starting point for James Baldwin’s autobiographical reflections on cinema is his adolescent identification with Bette Davis’ star image; see *The Devil Finds Work*, London, Michael Joseph, 1976, pp 4–7.

³⁰ *The Cosby Show* is the subject of two conflicting readings – as a ‘breakthrough’ and as a ‘sell out’: cf. Mel Cummings, ‘Black Family Interactions on Television’, presented at the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1986 and Pat Skinner, ‘Moving Way Up: Television’s “New Look” at Blacks’, presented at the International Television Studies Conference, London, 1988. Both ITSC conferences sponsored by the British Film Institute and the Institute of Education, University of London.

³¹ The concept of ‘Third Cinema’ was originally proposed by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino; see their ‘Towards a Third Cinema’, in Bill Nichols (ed), *Movies and Methods*, London and Berkeley, University of California, 1976. It has subsequently been expanded, with particular reference to African cinema, by Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1982.

ciation) in relation to the discourse authorised in the text (as black subject of the statement). Ethnic alterity is a consistent trope of modernist differentiation in various Euro-American canons: the play of black signs that inscribe the authorial voice self-referentially in Jonathan Demme's *Something Wild* can be seen as drawing on elements of the romanticist image-reservoir, where blackness is valorised as emblematic of outsidership and oppositionality, that might be read off Jean Genet's *Chant d'amour* (1953), Jean-Luc Godard's *One Plus One/Sympathy for the Devil* (1969) or Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976). This arbitrary list (indexing disparate debates on independent film-making³²) is made merely to point out another set of questions; namely, how to differentiate diverse appropriations of the same stock of signs and meanings built up around different discursive formations of 'race' and ethnicity? This question bears upon the broader underlying issue of the multi-accentual nature of the signs characteristic of the flash-points of ideological contestation and cultural struggle³³. It also alludes to the paradox identified in Richard Dyer's reading of Paul Robeson as a cinematic icon that meant different things to racially differentiated readers:

Black and white discourses on blackness seem to be valuing the same things – spontaneity, emotion, naturalness – yet giving them a different implication. Black discourses see them as contributions to the

*development of society, white as enviable qualities that only blacks have.*³⁴

The issue of 'envy' confirms that white identifications are as problematic (conceptually) as the ability of black readers – or readers of subaltern status – to 'appropriate alternative 'subtextual' readings from the racial discourse of dominant cultural texts. *King Kong* – to cite one of the most centred mythologies of modern popular cinema – has been read as the tragic story of a heroic beast and/or the fate of a black man punished for the transgressive coupling with the white woman that he/the monster desires. These questions appear to be 'new', hence very difficult, yet we have returned, by a rather circuitous route, to the hotly contested terrain of the debates on class and culture, hegemony and subjectivity that were territorialised with such passion in the mid-'70s.³⁵ We must conclude that this cannot possibly be the last word on 'race' as these complicated issues are only now coming into view as a result of the critical dialogue that has engaged with the blind spots and insights of earlier conversations. And further, that such dialogism is a necessary discursive condition for understanding contestation in film culture and other formations of cultural practice and cultural politics.

ISAAC JULIEN and KOBENA MERCER

³² Jean Genet's film is the subject of intense debate in the Cultural Identities seminar on 'Sexual Identities: Questions of Difference', in *Undercut* no 17, 1988. Maxine, the black woman in *Riddles of the Sphinx* is identified as a signifier of 'dark continent' mythology in Judith Williamson's critique of the film, 'Two or Three Things We Know About Ourselves', in *Consuming Passions*, London, Calder and Boyars, 1986, p 134. Frankie Dymon Jr was involved in Godard's *One Plus One* and subsequently directed his own film, *Death May Be Your Santa Claus* (1969), described as a 'pop fantasy' by Jim Pines, in 'The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema', op cit.

³³ Identified as indicative of class struggle, in V N Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, New York, Seminar Press, 1973. From another point of view, similar concepts are explored in Homi K Bhabha's reinterpretation of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* (Penguin, 1970) in his essay, 'The Commitment to Theory', in *New Formations* no 5, 1988, pp 20-22.

³⁴ Richard Dyer, 'Paul Robeson: Crossing Over', in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society*, London, BFI/Macmillan, 1987, p 79.

³⁵ See Rosalind Coward, 'Class, "Culture" and the Social Formation', *Screen* Spring 1977, vol 18 no 1, pp 75-105 and the response, from Iain Chambers et al, 'Marxism and Culture', *Screen* Winter 1977-78, vol 18 no 4, pp 109-119. On authorship, enunciation and textual analysis, see Paul Willemen, 'Notes on Subjectivity – On Reading Edward Branigan's "Subjectivity Under Siege"', *Screen* Spring 1978, vol 19 no 1, pp 41-69. And on critiques of 'Screen theory' from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, see David Morley, 'Texts, Readers, Subjects' and Stuart Hall, 'Recent Developments in Theories of Language and Ideology: A Critical Note', both in Stuart Hall et al (eds), *Culture, Media, Language*, London, Hutchinson, 1980.

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WHITE PRIVILEGE AND LOOKING RELATIONS: RACE AND GENDER IN FEMINIST FILM THEORY

BY JANE GAINES

¹ Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women, 1860-1960*, New York, Doubleday, 1987; Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1987; Valerie Smith, *Self-Discovery and Authority in Afro-American Narrative*, Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press, 1987; Henry Louis Gates, Jr (ed), *The Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, vol 1-30, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

² Judith Mayne, 'Feminist Film Theory and Criticism', *Signs* 11, no 1, Autumn, 1985, p 99; Teresa de Lauretis, 'Rethinking Women's Cinema: Aesthetics and Feminist Theory', *New German Critique*, no 34, Winter, 1985, reprinted in Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987, pp 138-139.

THIS ARTICLE WAS originally conceived as a challenge to the paradigm which dominated feminist film theory in Britain and the US for roughly ten years. Because that paradigm, significantly introduced and developed in *Screen*, has since lost its exclusive position in the field, some of the heatedness of the original essay no longer seems necessary. And yet, since the juxtaposition of psychoanalytic theory and the image of the black woman in history still produces friction, some of the contention is necessarily retained in what follows. Fortunately, laments about the dearth of theoretical work by black feminists are already starting to sound dated, since in the US we have begun to see the publication of important literary criticism, coinciding with a major effort to reprint the neglected writings of nineteenth century Afro-American women.¹ Other feminist film critics, in the year that this article was first delivered as a talk, remarked about the gap in the field produced by the absence of a perspective on women of colour.² Although there is somewhat more work being done on Asian, Hispanic and Afro-American women, and we are beginning to hear from black feminists who have started to work in film and television studies, feminist film theory itself has not, as yet, shown signs of the anticipated transformation.³

What I want to do here is to show how a theory of the text and its spectator, based on the psychoanalytic concept of sexual difference, is unequipped to deal with a film which is about racial difference and sexuality. The Diana Ross star-vehicle *Mahogany* (directed by Berry Gordy, 1975) immediately suggests a psychoanalytic approach because the narrative is organised around the connections between voyeurism and photographic acts, and because it exemplifies the classical cinema which has been so fully theorised in Lacanian terms. But as I will argue, the psychoanalytic model works to block out considerations which assume a different configuration, so that, for instance, the Freudian-Lacanian scenario can eclipse the scenario of race-gender relations in Afro-American history, since the two accounts of sexuality are fundamentally incongruous. The danger here is that when we use a psycho-

analytic model to explain black family relations, we force an erroneous universalisation and inadvertently reaffirm white middle-class norms.

By taking gender as its starting point in the analysis of oppression, feminist theory helps to reinforce white middle-class values, and to the extent that it works to keep women from seeing other structures of oppression, it functions ideologically. In this regard, Bell Hooks criticises a feminism which seems unable to think women's oppression in terms other than gender:

*Feminist analyses of woman's lot tend to focus exclusively on gender and do not provide a solid foundation on which to construct feminist theory. They reflect the dominant tendency in Western patriarchal minds to mystify women's reality by insisting that gender is the sole determinant of woman's fate.*⁴

Gender analysis rather exclusively illuminates the condition of white middle-class women, Hooks says, and its centrality in feminist theory suggests that those women who have constructed this theory have been ignorant of the way women in different racial groups and social classes experience oppression. Many of us would not dispute this. But exactly how should the feminist who does not want to be racist in her work respond to this criticism? In one of the few considerations of this delicate dilemma, Marilyn Frye, in her essay 'On Being White', urges us *not* to do what middle-class feminists have historically done: to assume responsibility for everyone. To take it upon oneself to rewrite feminist theory so that it encompasses our differences is another exercise of racial privilege, she says, and therefore all that one can do with conscience, is to undertake the study of our own 'determined ignorance'.⁵ One can begin to learn about the people whose history cannot be imagined from a position of privilege. My argument then takes two different turns. One of these juxtaposes black feminist theory with those aspects of feminist theory which have a tendency to function as normative; the other juxtaposes people's history with the discourses of representation, in order to ask the even more difficult question of how we can grasp the interacting levels of the social formation.

I.

I recall from graduate school in the late 1970s the voice of feminist film theory as I first heard it – firm in its insistence on attention to cinematic language, and strict in its prohibition against comparisons between actuality and text. This voice of feminist film theory I always heard as a British-accented female voice, and over and over again I heard it reminding me that feminists could only analyse the ideological through its encoding in the conventions of editing and the mechanics of the motion-picture machine. This was the point in the history of the field when there were only two texts which had earned the distinction of 'feminist film theory' (as opposed to criticism), and in the US we were very aware

³ For an example of the new work in film and television by black feminist critics, see Jacqueline Bobo, '“The Color Purple”: Black Women as Cultural Readers', and Alile Sharon Larkin, 'Black Women Filmmakers Defining Ourselves: Feminism in Our Own Voice', in Diedre Pribram (ed), *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*, London and New York, Verso, 1988.

⁴ Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Boston, South End Press, 1984, p 12.

⁵ Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, Trumansburg, New York, The Crossing Press, 1984, pp 113, 118.

⁶ Claire Johnston, 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', in Claire Johnston (ed), *Notes on Women's Cinema*, London, Society for Education in Film and Television, 1973, reprinted in Patricia Erens (ed), *Sexual Stratagems*, New York, Horizon, 1979, Bill Nichols (ed), *Movies and Methods*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1976; Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, reprinted in Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (eds), *Women and Cinema*, New York, Dutton, 1977, Tony Bennett, et al (eds), *Popular Film and Television*, London, British Film Institute, 1981, Brian Wallis (ed), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, New York, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1984, Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (eds), *Film Theory and Criticism*, third edition, New York, Oxford, 1985, Bill Nichols (ed), *Movies and Methods II*, University of California Press, 1985.

⁷ Stuart Hall, 'On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview', *Journal of Communication Inquiry* vol 10 no 2, Summer 1986, p 57.

⁸ As quoted in Annette Kolodny, 'Respectability is Eroding the Revolutionary Potential of Feminist Criticism', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 4, 1988, A 52.

that they came out of British Marxism: Claire Johnston's 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', and Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which has probably been reprinted more times than any other academic essay in English in a ten-year time span.⁶ In retrospect, we understand that the apparent intransigence of the theory of cinema as patriarchal discourse, as it developed out of these essays, is the legacy of the Althusserian theory of the subject. While it is clear from the point of view of Marxist feminism that the psychoanalytic version of the construction of the subject was a welcome supplement to classical Marxism, what was gained with a theory of the social individual was at the cost of losing the theory of social antagonism.

The ramifications for feminism would be different on the American side of the Atlantic. The theory of the subject as constituted in language, imported into US academic circles, could swell to the point where it seemed to be able to account for all oppression, expression and socio-sexual functioning in history. The enormously complicated developments through which European Marxists saw a need for enlarging the capacity of the theory of ideology were lost in translation, so that in the US what we heard was that 'Representation reproduces the patriarchal order'. Stuart Hall has described this tendency, in both discourse theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as the opposite of the economism which these theories intended to modify – 'a reduction upward rather than downward'. What transpires in such movements to correct economism is that, as he says, 'the metaphor of x operates like y is reduced to $x = y$ '.⁷

This would happen with a vengeance in the US university scene where the theory of classical cinema as patriarchal discourse would appear at first quite alone and recently divorced from larger Marxist debates. On campuses where students could not hope to acquire any background in political economy, a film course introduction to the analysis of subjectivity and cinema might well be the only exposure to Marxist theory in an entire college career. We must now wonder, however, if the relatively easy assimilation of *Screen* theory into feminist studies in the US had something to do with the way the radical potential of the theory was quieted through the very psychoanalytic terminology it employed. We further need to consider the warm reception given to high feminist film theory in women's studies circles in terms of the new respectability of academic feminism in the US, surely signalled by Peter Brooks' statement that 'Anyone worth his salt in literary criticism today has to become something of a feminist.'⁸

Within film and television studies in the US, the last three years have seen a break with the theory of representation which, it appears, had gripped us for so long. The new feminist strategies which engage with, modify or abandon the stubborn notion that we are simultaneously positioned in language and ideology, are too numerous to detail. In the US, as in Britain, one of the most influential challenges to this theory posed the question of our reconstitution at different historical moments. How could the formative moment of one's entry into language be the one con-

dition overriding all other determining conditions of social existence? This question would become especially pertinent as theoretical interest shifted from the text which produced subjects to the subjects who produced texts; the 'real historical subject' became the escape route through which theorists abandoned a text weighted down with impossible expectations.

II.

In the US, lesbian feminists raised the first objections to the way in which film theory explained the operation of the classic realist text in terms of tensions between masculinity and femininity. The understanding of spectatorial pleasure in classical cinema as inherently male drew an especially sharp response from critics who argued that this theory cancelled the lesbian spectator whose viewing pleasure could never be construed as anything like male voyeurism. Positing a lesbian spectator would significantly change the trajectory of the gaze. It might even lead us to see how the eroticised star body might be not just the object, but what I would term the visual objective of another female gaze within the film's diegesis – a gaze with which the viewer might identify; following this argument, Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* are 'only for each other's eyes'.⁹ Two influential studies building on the lesbian reading of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* suggested that the lesbian reception of *Personal Best* held a key to challenging the account of cinema as producing patriarchal subject positions – since lesbian viewers, at least, were subverting dominant meanings and confounding textual structures.¹⁰

Consistently, lesbians have charged that cultural theory posed in psychoanalytic terms is unable to conceive of desire or explain pleasure without reference to the binary oppositions male/female. This is the function of what Monique Wittig calls the heterosexual assumption, or the 'straight mind', that unacknowledged structure not only built into Lacanian psychoanalysis, but underlying the basic divisions of Western culture; organising all knowledge, yet escaping any close examination.¹¹ Male/female is a powerful, but sometimes blinding construct. And it is difficult to see that the paradigm which we embraced so quickly in our first lessons in feminism may have been standing in the way of our further education.

The male/female opposition, seemingly so fundamental to feminism, may actually lock us into modes of analysis which will continually misinterpret the position of many women. Thus it is that women of colour, like lesbians, an afterthought in feminist analysis, remain unassimilated by this problematic. Feminist anthologies consistently include articles on black female and lesbian perspectives as illustration of the liberality and inclusiveness of feminism; however, the very concept of 'different perspectives', while validating distinctness and maintaining woman as common denominator, still places the categories of race and sexual pre-

⁹ Lucie Arbuthnot and Gail Seneca, 'Pre-Text and Text in "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes"', *Film Reader* 5, Winter 1981, pp 13-23.

¹⁰ Chris Straayer, ' "Personal Best": Lesbian/Feminist Audience', *Jump Cut* 29, February 1984, pp 40-44; Elizabeth Ellsworth, 'Illicit Pleasures: Feminist Spectators and "Personal Best"', *Wide Angle* vol 8, no 2, 1986, pp 46-56.

¹¹ Monique Wittig, 'The Straight Mind', *Feminist Issues*, Summer 1980, pp 107-111.

¹² Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in Carol Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger*, Boston and London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984, p 307.

¹³ Barbara Smith, 'Towards a Black Feminist Criticism', in Elaine Showalter (ed), *The New Feminist Criticism*, New York, Pantheon, 1985, p 169.

¹⁴ Bonnie Thornton Dill, 'Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood', *Feminist Studies* vol 9, no 1, Spring 1983, p 134; for a slightly different version of this essay see ' "On the Hem of Life": Race, Class, and the Prospects for Sisterhood', in Amy Swerdlow and Hanna Lessinger (eds), *Class, Race, and Sex: The Dynamics of Control*, Boston, Hall, 1983; Margaret Simons, 'Racism and Feminism: A Schism in the Sisterhood', *Feminist Studies* vol 5, no 2, Summer 1979, p 392.

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, New York, Norton, 1979, pp 302-303, notes that while blacks link their experience of racism with the white woman, this is still patriarchal racism working through her. It is possible, she says, that 'a black first grader, or that child's mother, or a black patient in a hospital, or a family on welfare, may experience racism most directly in the person of a white

ference in theoretical limbo. Our political etiquette is correct, but our theory is not so perfect.

In Marxist feminist analysis, the factors of race and sexual preference have remained loose ends; as categories of oppression they fit somewhat awkwardly into a model based on class relations in capitalist society. Although some gay historians see a relationship between the rise of capitalism and the creation of the social homosexual, only with a very generous notion of sexual hierarchies – such as the one Gayle Rubin has suggested – can sexual oppression (as distinct from gender oppression) be located within a framework based on class.¹² Race has folded into Marxist models more neatly than sexual preference, but the orthodox formulation which understands racial conflict as class struggle, is still unsatisfactory to Marxist feminists who want to know exactly how gender intersects with race. The oppression of *women* of colour remains incompletely grasped by the classical Marxist paradigm.

Just as the Marxist model based on class has obscured the function of gender, the feminist model based on the male/female division under patriarchy has obscured the function of race. The dominant feminist paradigm actually encourages us not to think in terms of any oppression other than male dominance and female subordination. Thus it is that feminists and lesbians, says Barbara Smith, seem '... blinded to the implications of any womanhood that is not white womanhood...'.¹³ For purposes of analysis, black feminists agree that class is as significant as race; however, if these feminists hesitate to emphasise gender as a factor, it is in deference to the way black women describe their experience, for it is clear that Afro-American women have historically formulated identity and political allegiance in terms of race rather than gender or class.¹⁴ Feminism, however, seems not to have heard the statements of women of colour who say that they experience oppression first in relation to race rather than gender, and that for them exploitation can be personified by a white female.¹⁵ Even more difficult for feminist theory to digest is black female identification with the black male. On this point, black feminists diverge from white feminists, in repeatedly reminding us that they do not necessarily see the black male as patriarchal antagonist, but feel instead that their racial oppression is 'shared' with men.¹⁶ In the most comprehensive analysis of all, black lesbian feminists have described race, class and gender oppression as an 'interlocking' synthesis in the lives of black women.¹⁷

The point here is not to rank the structures of oppression in a way that implies the need for black women to choose between solidarity with men or solidarity with women, between race or gender as the basis for a political strategy. At issue is the question of the fundamental antagonism which has been so relevant for Marxist feminist theory. Where we have foregrounded one antagonism in our analysis, we have misunderstood another, and this is most dramatically illustrated in applying the notion of patriarchy. Feminists have not been absolutely certain what they mean by patriarchy: alternately it has referred to either father-right or

domination of women; but what is consistent about the use of the concept is the rigidity of the structure it describes.¹⁸ Patriarchy is incompatible with Marxism where it is used trans-historically without qualification, and where it becomes the source from which all other oppressions are tributary, as in the radical feminist theory of patriarchal order, which sees oppression in all forms and through all ages as derived from the male/female division.¹⁹ This deterministic model, which Sheila Rowbotham says functions like a 'feminist base-superstructure', has the disadvantage of leaving us with no sense of movement, or no idea of how women have acted to change their condition, especially in comparison with the fluidity of the Marxist conception of class.²⁰

The radical feminist notion of absolute patriarchy has also one-sidedly portrayed the oppression of women through an analogy with slavery, and since this theory has identified woman as man's savage or repressed Other it competes with theories of racial difference which understand the black as the 'unassimilable Other'.²¹ Finally, the notion of patriarchy is most obtuse when it disregards the position white women occupy over black men as well as black women.²² In order to rectify this tendency in feminism, black feminists refer to 'racial patriarchy', which is based on an analysis of the white patriarch/master in US history, and his dominance over the black male as well as the black female.²³

III.

I want now to reconsider the connotations of sexual looking, with reference to a film in which racial difference structures a hierarchy of access to the female image. In *Mahogany*, her follow-up to *Lady Sings The Blues*, Diana Ross plays an aspiring fashion designer who dreams of pulling herself up and out of her Chicago South Side neighbourhood by means of a high-powered career. During the day, Tracy Chambers is assistant to the modelling supervisor for a large department store. At night she attends design school, where the instructor reprimands her for sketching a cocktail dress instead of completing the assignment, the first suggestion of the exotic irrelevance of her fantasy career. She loses her job, but the famous fashion photographer Sean McEvoy (Anthony Perkins) discovers her as a model and whisks her off to Rome. There, Tracy finally realises her ambition to become a designer, when a wealthy Italian admirer gives her a business of her own. After the grand show unveiling her first collection of clothes, she returns to Chicago and is reunited with community organiser Brian Walker (Billy Dee Williams), whose political career is a counterpoint to Tracy's modelling career.

With its long fashion photography montage sequences temporarily interrupting the narrative, *Mahogany* invites a reading based on the alternation between narrative and woman-as-spectacle as theorised by Laura Mulvey in 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. To the allure of pure spectacle these sequences add the fascination of masquerade and

woman, who stands for those service professions through which white male supremacist society controls the mother, the child, the family, and all of us. It is *her* racism, yes, but a racism learned in the same patriarchal school which taught her that women are unimportant or unequal, not to be trusted with power, where she learned to mistrust and hear her own impulses for rebellion; to become an instrument.'

¹⁶ Gloria Joseph, 'The Incompatible Menage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism and Racism', in Lydia Sargent (ed), *Women and Revolution*, Boston, South End Press, 1981, p 96; The Combahee River Collective in 'Combahee River Collective Statement', in Barbara Smith (ed), *Home Girls*, New York, Kitchen Table Press, 1983, p 275, compares their alliance with black men with the negative identification white women have with white men: 'Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we struggle with Black men about sexism.'

¹⁷ Combahee River Collective, *ibid*, p 272.

¹⁸ Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today*, London, Verso, 1980, p 15.

¹⁹ For a comparison between radical feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist and socialist feminism, see Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1983.

²⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, 'The Trouble with Patriarchy', in Raphael Samuel (ed), *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London and Boston, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, p 365.

²¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans Charles Lam Markmann, Paris, 1952; reprinted New York, Grove Press, 1967, p 161.

²² Margaret Simons, 'Racism and Feminism', op cit, p 387.

²³ Barbara Omolade, 'Hearts of Darkness', in Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (eds), *Powers of Desire*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1983, p 352.

²⁴ Nancy Hall-Duncan, *The History of Fashion Photography*, New York, Alpine Books, 1979, p 196.

transformation. Effected with wigs and make-up colours, the transformations are a play on and against 'darkness'; Diana Ross is a high-tech Egyptian queen, a pale mediaeval princess, a turbaned Asiatic, a body-painted blue nymph. As her body colour is powdered over or washed out in bright light, and as her long-haired wigs blow around her face, she becomes suddenly 'white'.

Contemporary motion pictures never seem to exhaust the narrative possibilities associated with the camera-as-deadly-weapon metaphor; *Mahogany* adds to this the sadomasochistic connotations of high fashion photography with reference to the mid-seventies work of Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, linked to the tradition of 'attraction by shock'.²⁴ The montage sequences chronicling Tracy's career, from perfume ads to high fashion magazine covers, equate the photographic act with humiliation and violation. Camera zoom and freeze-frame effects translate directly into aggression, as in the sequence in which Sean pushes Tracy into a fountain and her dripping image solidifies into an Italian Revlon advertisement. Finally, the motif of stopping-the-action-as-aggression is equated with the supreme violation: attempted murder. Pressing his favourite model to her expressive limits, Sean drives her off an expressway ramp. Since this brutality escalates after the scene in which he fails with Tracy in bed, the film represents her punishment as a direct consequence of his impotence.

With its classic castration threat scenario, its connection between voyeurism and sadism, and its reference to fetishisation – as seen in Sean's photographic shrine to the models he has abused – *Mahogany* is the per-



Photographer Sean's aggressive treatment of model Tracy in *Mahogany*.

fect complement to a psychoanalytic analysis of classical Hollywood's visual pleasure. The film further provides material for such an analysis by producing its own 'proof' that there is only an incremental difference between voyeurism (fashion photography) and sadism (murder). The black and white photographic blow-ups of Tracy salvaged from the death car seem undeniable evidence of the fine line between looking and killing, or, held at another angle, between advertising imagery and pornography.

This, then, is to suggest the kind of evidence in the film which would support an analysis of it as patriarchal discourse, in its use of the female image as fetish to assuage castration anxiety, and through its rich offering of views to please the male spectator. There's even an inescapable suggestion of voyeurism as pathology, since the gaze is that of the actor whose star persona is fatally haunted by the protagonist of *Psycho*. To explain the ideological function of the film in terms of the construction of male pleasure, however, is to 'aid and abet' the film's other ideological project. In following the line of analysis I have outlined, one is apt to step into an ideological signifying trap set up by the chain of meanings that lead away from seeing the film in terms of racial conflict. Because there are so many connotative paths – photographer exploits model, madman assaults woman, voyeur attempts murder – we may not immediately see white man as aggressor against black woman. Other strategies encourage the viewer to forget or not notice racial issues. For instance, the narrative removes Tracy from racially polarised Chicago to Rome, where the brown Afro-American woman with Caucasian features is added to the collection of a photographer who names his subjects after prized objects or their qualities. Losing her black community identity, Tracy becomes Mahogany, acquiring the darkness, richness and value the name connotes; that is, her blackness becomes commodified.

Mahogany functions ideologically for black viewers in the traditional Marxist sense, that is, in the way the film obscures the class nature of social antagonisms. This has certain implications for working-class black viewers, who would gain most from seeing the relationship between race, gender and class oppression. Further, *Mahogany* has the same trouble with representing black femaleness that the wider culture has had historically; a black female is either all woman and tinted black, or mostly black and scarcely woman. These two expectations correspond with the two worlds and two struggles which structure the film: the struggle over the sexual objectification of Tracy's body in the face of commercial exploitation, and the struggle of the black community in the face of class exploitation. But the film identifies this antagonism as the hostility between fashion and politics, embodied respectively by Tracy and Brian, and it is through them that it organises conflict and, eventually, reconciliation. Intensifying this conflict between characters, the film contrasts 'politics' and 'fashion' in one daring homage to the aesthetic of 'attraction by shock'; Sean arranges his models symmetrically on the back stairwell of a run-down Chicago apartment building and uses the confused tenants and street people as props. Flamboyant

excess, the residue of capital, is juxtaposed with a kind of dumbfounded poverty. For a moment, the scene figures the synthesis of gender, class and race, but the political glimpse is fleeting. Forced together as a consequence of the avant-garde's socially irresponsible quest for a new outrage, the political antagonisms are suspended – temporarily immobilised as the subjects pose.

The connection between gender, class and race oppression is also denied as the ghetto photography session's analogy between commercial exploitation and race/class exploitation merely registers on the screen as visual incongruity. Visual discrepancy, which, as I have argued, is used for aesthetic effect, also makes it difficult to grasp the confluence of race, class and gender oppression in the image of Tracy Chambers. The character's class background magically becomes decor in the film – it neither radicalises her nor drags her down; instead it sets her off. Diana Ross is alternately weighed down by the glamour iconography of commercial modelling or stripped to a black body. But the *haute couture* iconography ultimately dominates the film. Since race is decorative and class does not reveal itself to the eye, Tracy can only be seen as exploited in terms of her role as a model.

If the film plays down race, it does not do so just to accommodate white audiences. In worshipping the success of the black cult star and combining this with Diana Ross's own dream-come-true – a chance to design all of the costumes in her own film – *Mahogany* hawks the philosophy of black enterprise and social aspiration. Here it does not matter where you come from, what you should be asking yourself, in the words of the theme song, is 'Where are you going, do you know?' Race, then, should be seen as any other obstacle – to be transcended through diligent work and dedication to a goal. Supporting the film's self-help philosophy is the related story of Diana Ross's 'discovery' as a skinny teenager singing in a Baptist Church in Detroit. With *Mahogany*, Motown president and founder Berry Gordy (who fired Tony Richardson and took over the film's direction) helps Diana Ross to make something of herself again, just as he helped so many aspiring recording artists, by coaching them in money management and social decorum in his talent school.²⁵

The phenomenon of Motown Industries is less a comment on the popularity of the self-help philosophy than a verification of the discrepancy between the opportunity formula and the social existence of black Americans. Ironically, black capitalism's one big success thrives on the impossibility of black enterprise: soul entertainment as compensation and release sells because capitalism cannot deliver well-being to all.²⁶ Black music and performance, despite the homogenisation of the original forms, represents a utopian aspiration for black Americans, as well as for white suburbanites. Simon Frith describes the need supplied by rock fantasy:

Black music had a radical, rebellious edge: it carried a sense of possibility denied in the labor market; it suggested a comradeship, a sensuality, a grace

²⁵ Stephen Birmingham, *Certain People*, Boston and Toronto, Little, Brown, 1977, pp 262-263.

²⁶ Manning Marable, in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, Boston, South End Press, 1983, p 157, lists Motown Industries as the largest grossing black-owned corporation in the US which did 64.8 million dollars in business in 1979.

and joy and energy lacking in work . . . the power of rock fantasy rests, precisely on utopianism.²⁷

Given that popular culture can accommodate the possibility of both containment and resistance in what Stuart Hall calls its 'double movement', I want to turn to the ways *Mahogany* can be seen to move in the other direction.²⁸

Racial conflict looms or recedes in this film rather like the perceptual trick in which, depending on the angle of view, one swirling pattern or the other pops out at the viewer. Some perceptual ambiguity, for instance, is built into the confrontation between black and white, as in the scene in which Sean lures Brian into a struggle over an unloaded weapon. The outcome, in which Sean, characterised as a harmless eccentric, manipulates Brian into pulling the trigger, could be read as confirming the racist conception that blacks who possess street reflexes are murderous aggressors. *Ebony* magazine, the black equivalent of *Life* magazine in the US, however, features a promotional still of the scene (representing Brian holding a gun over Sean), with a caption describing how Brian is tricked but still wins the fight.²⁹ Just as viewers choose the winners of such ambiguous conflicts, they may also choose to inhabit 'looking' structures. The studies of lesbian readership already cited show that subcultural groups can interpret popular forms to their advantage, even without invitation from the text. Certainly more work needs to be done with the positioning of the audience around the category of race, considering, for instance, the social prohibitions against the black man's sexual glance, the interracial intermingling of male 'looks', and other visual taboos related to sanctions against interracial sexuality, but these are beyond the scope of this article.

One of the original tenets of contemporary feminist film theory – that the (male) spectator possesses the female indirectly through the eyes of the male protagonist (his screen surrogate) – is problematised here by the less privileged black male gaze. Racial hierarchies of access to the female image also relate to other scenarios which are unknown by psychoanalytic categories. Considering the racial categories which psychoanalysis does not recognise, then, we see that the white male photographer monopolises the classic patriarchal look controlling the view of the female body, and that the black male protagonist's look is either repudiated or frustrated. The sumptuous image of Diana Ross is made available to the spectator via the white male character (Sean) but *not* through the look of the black male character (Brian). In the sequence in which Tracy and Brian first meet outside her apartment building, his 'look' is renounced. In each of the three shots of Tracy from Brian's point of view, she turns from him, walking out of his sight and away from the sound of his voice as he shouts at her through a megaphone. The relationship between the male and female protagonists is negotiated around Brian's bullhorn, emblem of his charismatic black leadership, through which he tries to reach both the black woman and his constituents. Both visual and audio control is thus denied the black

²⁷ Simon Frith, *Sound Effects*, New York Pantheon, 1981, p 264.

²⁸ Stuart Hall, 'Notes on Deconstructing "The Popular"', in *People's History and Socialist Theory*, p 228.

²⁹ 'Spectacular New Film for Diana Ross: "Mahogany"', *Ebony*, October, 1975, p 146.



Racial hierarchies of access to the female image: white males monopolise the classic patriarchal look

³⁰ Rennie Simpson, 'The Afro-American Female: The Historical Context of the Construction of Sexual Identity', in *Powers of Desire*, op cit, p 230.

³¹ Angela Davis, 'The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', *The Black Scholar*, December 1971, pp 5-6.

³² Barbara Omolade, 'Hearts of Darkness', op cit, p 352.

³³ Gloria Joseph, 'The Incompatible Ménage à Trois', op cit, p 99; Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Trumansburg, New York, The Crossing Press, 1984, p 119, says: 'Because of the continuous battle against racial erasure that Black women and Black men share, some Black women still refuse to

male, and the failure of his voice is consistently associated with Tracy's publicity image in the white world. The discovery by Brian's aides of the Mahogany advertisement for Revlon in *Newsweek* coincides with the report that the Gallup polls show the black candidate trailing in the election. Later, the film cuts from the *Harper's Bazaar* cover featuring Mahogany to Brian's limping campaign where the sound of his voice magnified through a microphone is intermittently drowned out by a passing train as he makes his futile pitch to white factory workers. The manifest goal of the film, the reconciliation of the black heterosexual couple, is thwarted by the commercial appropriation of her image, but, in addition, its highly-mediated form threatens the black political struggle.

IV.

For black feminists, history seems to be the key to understanding black female sexuality. 'The construction of the sexual self of the Afro-American woman,' says Rennie Simson, 'has its roots in the days of slavery.'³⁰ Looking at this construction over time reveals a pattern of patriarchal phases and female sexual adjustments that has no equivalent in the history of white women in the US. In the first phase, characterised by the dominance of the white master during the period of slavery, black men and women were equal by default. To have allowed the black male any power over the black woman would have threatened the power balance of the slave system. Thus, as Angela Davis explains social control in the slave community, 'The man slave could not be the unquestioned superior within the "family" or community, for there was no such thing as the "family" provided among the Slaves.'³¹ The legacy

of this phase has involved both the rejection of the pedestal the white female has occupied, as well as the heritage of retaliation against white male abuse. If the strategy for racial survival was resistance during the first phase, it was accommodation during the next. During Reconstruction, the black family, modelled after the white bourgeois household, was constituted defensively in an effort to preserve the race.³² Black women yielded to their men in deference to a tradition that promised respectability and safety. Re-evaluating this history, black feminists point out that, during Reconstruction, the black male, following the example of the white patriarch, 'learned' to dominate. Poet Audre Lorde, for instance, sees sexism in black communities as not original to them, but as a plague that has struck.³³ One of the most telling manifestations of the difference between the operation of patriarchy in the lives of black as opposed to white women is the way this is worked out *at the level of language* in the formal conventions organising the short stories and novels of Afro-American women. Particularly in the work of early writers such as Harriet E Wilson, Frances E W Harper, and Pauline Hopkins, the black father is completely missing and, as Hazel Carby says, 'The absent space in fiction by black women confirms this denial of patriarchal power to black men'³⁴. The position consistently taken by black feminists, that patriarchy was originally foreign to the Afro-American community and was introduced into it historically, then, represents a significant break with feminist theories which see patriarchal power invested equally in all men throughout history, and patriarchal form as colour blind.

Black history also adds another dimension to the concept of 'rape', which has emerged as the favoured metaphor for defining women's jeopardy in the second wave of feminism, replacing 'prostitution', which articulated women's fears in the nineteenth century.³⁵ The charge of rape, conjuring up a historical connection with lynching, is inextricably connected in North American history with the myth of the black man as archetypal rapist. We can never again use the concept of 'rape' quite so abstractly in its generic or metaphorical sense, after we have considered the way 'white' or 'black' has historically modified, or shall we say 'inflamed', the act and the term. During slavery, white male abuse of black women was a symbolic blow to black manhood, understood as rape only within the black community. With the increase in the sexual violation of black women during Reconstruction, the act of rape began to reveal its fuller political implications. After emancipation, the rape of black women was a 'message' to black men, which, according to one historian, could be seen as 'a reaction to the effort of the freedman to assume the role of patriarch, able to provide for and protect his family.'³⁶ Simultaneous with the actual violation of black women, the empty charge of rape hurled at the black man clouded the real issue of black (male) enfranchisement, by creating a smokescreen through the incendiary issue of interracial sexuality. Writing at the turn of the century, black novelist Pauline Hopkins unmasked the alibis for lynching in *Contending Forces*:

recognize that we are also oppressed as women, and that sexual hostility against Black women is practiced not only by the white racist society, but implemented within our Black communities as well. It is a disease striking the heart of Black nationhood, and silence will not make it disappear.'

³⁴ Hazel Carby, '“On the Threshold of Woman's Era”: Lynching, Empire, and Sexuality in Black Feminist Theory', *Critical Inquiry* vol 12, no 1, Autumn 1985, p 276; Harriet E Wilson, *Our Nig*, 1859, reprinted New York, Random House, 1983; Frances E W Harper, *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted*, 1892, reprinted New York, Oxford University Press, 1988; Pauline E Hopkins, *Contending Forces*, 1900, reprinted Oxford University Press, 1988.

³⁵ Linda Gordon and Ellen DuBois, 'Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth Century Feminist Sexual Thought', *Feminist Review* 13, Spring 1983, p 43.

³⁶ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, '“The Mind That Burns in Each Body”: Women, Rape, and Racial Violence', in *Powers of Desire*, op cit, p 332; see also Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *The Revolt Against Chivalry*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1979; Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, New York, Random House, 1983, chapter 11.

³⁷ As quoted in Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood*, op cit, p 275.

³⁸ See, for instance, Jessie Fauset, *There is Confusion*, New York, Boni and Liveright, 1924, and *Plum Bun*, 1928, reprinted New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983; Nella Larsen, *Quicksand*, 1928, and *Passing*, 1929, reprinted New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1986.

*Lynching was instituted to crush the manhood of the enfranchised black. Rape is the crime which appeals most strongly to the heart of the home life . . . The men who created the mulatto race, who recruit its ranks year after year by the very means which they invoked lynch law to suppress, bewailing the sorrows of violated womanhood!*³⁷

Here is a sexual scenario to rival the Oedipal myth; the black woman sexually violated by the white man, but the fact of her rape repressed and displaced on to the virginal white woman, and thus used symbolically as the justification for the actual castration of the black man. It is against this historical scenario that we should place the symbolic castration that is the penalty of sexual looking – a penalty that must surely diminish in comparison with the very real threat of actual castration that such looking would once have carried with it.

V.

Quite simply, then, there are structures relevant to any interpretation of *Mahogany* which override the patriarchal scenario feminists have theorised as formally determining. From Afro-American history, we should recall the white male's appropriation of the black woman's body which weakened the black male and undermined the community. From Afro-American literature, we should also consider the scenario of the talented and beautiful mulatta who 'passes' in white culture, but decides to return to black society.³⁸ The mulatta suggests the rich possibilities of a theory of black female representation which takes account of 'passing' as an eroticising alternation and a peculiar play on difference, as well as a sign of the double consciousness of those women who can be seen as either black or white at the same time as they may see themselves as both races at once. Further, we need to reconsider the woman's picture narrative convention – the career renounced in favour of the man – in the context of black history. Tracy's choice recapitulates black aspiration and the white middle class model which equates stable family life with respectability, but her decision is significantly different from the white heroine's capitulation since it favours black community cooperation over acceptance by white society. Finally, one of the most difficult questions raised by Afro-American history and literature has to do with interracial heterosexuality and sexual 'looking'. *Mahogany* suggests that, since a black male character is not allowed the position of control occupied by a white male character, race could be a factor in the construction of cinematic language. More work on looking and racial taboos might determine whether or not mainstream cinema can offer the male spectator the pleasure of looking at a white female character via the gaze of a black male character. Framing the question of male privilege and viewing pleasure as the 'right to look' may help us to rethink film theory along more materialist lines, considering, for instance, how some groups have historically had the licence to 'look' openly while other groups

have 'looked' illicitly.³⁹ In other words, does the psychoanalytic model allow us to consider the prohibitions against homosexuality and miscegenation?

Feminists who use psychoanalytic theory have been careful to point out that 'looking' positions do not correlate with social groups, and that ideological positioning is placement in a representational system which has no one-to-one correspondence with social experience. This, of course, keeps the levels of the social ensemble hopelessly separate. While I would not want to argue that form is ideologically neutral, I would suggest that we have overemphasised the ideological function of 'signifying practice' at the expense of considering other ideological implications of the conflicting meanings in the text. Or, as Terry Lovell puts it:

*... while interpretation depends on analysis of the work's signifying practice, assessment of its meanings from the point of view of its validity, or of its ideology, depends on comparison between those structures of meaning and their object of reference, through the mediation of another type of discourse.*⁴⁰

The impetus behind Marxist criticism, whether we want to admit it or not, is to make comparisons between social reality as we live it and ideology as it does not correspond to that reality. This we attempt to do knowing full well (having learned from post-structuralism), the futility of looking for real relations which are completely outside ideology in either the present or in history. And we probably need to turn this critique on the emerging notion of the 'days of slavery' as the key to black female sexuality, in order to avoid the temptation of using it as some searing truth which, held up to the bloated discourses of patriarchy, had the power to make them finally groan and shrivel.

Thus, while I am still willing to argue, as I did in the earlier version of this article, that we can see the *Mahogany* narrative as a metaphor of the search for black female sexuality, I see something else in hindsight. I would describe this as the temptation in an emerging black feminist criticism, much like an earlier tendency in lesbian criticism, to place sexuality safely out of patriarchal bounds by declaring it outside culture, by furtively hiding it in subcultural enclaves where it can remain 'its essential self', protected from the meaning-making mainstream culture. *Mahogany*, then, is finally about the mythical existence of something elusive yet potent. We know it through what white men do to secure it, and what black men are without it. It is the ultimate object of desire to the photographer-connoisseur of women who dies trying to record its 'trace' on film. It is known by degree – whatever is most wild and enigmatic, whatever cannot be conquered or subdued – the last frontier of female sexuality. Although it is undetectable to the advertising men who can only analyse physical attributes, it is immediately perceptible to a lesbian (Gavina herself, the owner of the Italian advertising agency), who uses it to promote the most intangible and subjective of commodities – perfume.⁴¹ Contrary to the suggestion that black female sexuality

³⁹ Fredric Jameson in 'Pleasure: A Political Issue', *Formations of Pleasure*, Boston and London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983, p. 7, interprets Mulvey's connection between viewing pleasure and male power as the conferral of a 'right to look'. He does not take this further, but I find the term suggestive and at the same time potentially volatile.

⁴⁰ Terry Lovell, *Pictures of Reality*, London, British Film Institute, 1980, p. 90.

⁴¹ Richard Dyer, 'Mahogany', in Charlotte Brunsdon (ed.), *Films for Women*, London, British Film Institute, 1986, p. 135, suggested this first about Gavina.

might still remain in excess of culture, and hence unfathomed and uncoded, it is worked over again and again in mainstream culture because of its apparent elusiveness, and in this context it is rather like bottled scent which is often thought to convey its essence to everyone but the person wearing it.

To return to my main point, as feminists have theorised women's sexuality, they have universalised from the particular experience of white women, thus effecting what Hortense Spillers has called a 'deadly metonymy'.⁴² While white feminists theorise the female image in terms of objectification, fetishisation and symbolic absence, their black counterparts describe the body as the site of symbolic resistance and the 'paradox of non-being', a reference to the period in Afro-American history when black female did not signify 'woman'.⁴³ What strikes me still in this comparison is the stubbornness of the terms of feminist discourse analysis which has not been able to deal, for instance, with what it has meant historically to be designated as not-human, and how black women, whose bodies were legally not their own, fought against treatment based on this determination. Further, feminist analysis of culture as patriarchal cannot conceive of any connection between the female image and class or racial exploitation which includes the male. Historically, black men and women, although not equally endangered, have been simultaneously implicated in incidents of interracial brutality. During two different periods of Afro-American history, sexual assault, '... symbolic of the effort to conquer the resistance the black woman could unloose', was a warning to the entire black community.⁴⁴ If, as feminists have argued, women's sexuality evokes an unconscious terror in men, then black women's sexuality represents a special threat to white patriarchy; the possibility of its eruption stands for the aspirations of the black race as a whole.

My frustration with the feminist voice that insists on change *at the level of language* is that this position can only deal with the historical situation described above by turning it into discourse, and even as I write this, acutely aware as I am of the theoretical prohibitions against mixing representational issues with historical ones, I feel the pressure to transpose people's struggles into more discursively manageable terms. However, a theory of ideology which separates the levels of the social formation, in such a way that it is not only inappropriate but theoretically impossible to introduce the category of history into the analysis, cannot be justified with Marxism. This has been argued elsewhere by others, among them Stuart Hall, who finds the 'universalist tendency' found in both Freud and Lacan responsible for this impossibility. The incompatibility between Marxism and psychoanalytic theory is insurmountable at this time, he argues, because 'the concepts elaborated by Freud (and reworked by Lacan) cannot, *in their in-general and universalist form*, enter the theoretical space of historical materialism'.⁴⁵ In discussions within feminist film theory, it has often seemed the other way round – that historical materialism could not enter the space theorised by discourse analysis drawing on psychoanalytic concepts.

⁴² Hortense J Spillers, 'Interstices: A Small Drama of Words', in Carol Vance (ed), *Pleasure and Danger*, op cit, p 78.

⁴³ *ibid*, p 77.

⁴⁴ Angela Davis, 'The Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves', op cit, p 11.

⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, 'Debate: Psychology, Ideology and the Human Subject', *Ideology and Consciousness*, October 1977, pp 118-119.

Sealed off as it is (in theory), this analysis may not comprehend the category of the real historical subject, but its use will always have implications for that subject.

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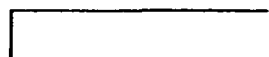
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NIGGER/LOVER: THE THIN SHEEN OF RACE IN 'SOMETHING WILD'

BY CAMERON BAILEY

She walked with measured steps, draped in striped and fringed clothes, treading the earth proudly, with a slight jingle and flash of barbarous ornaments. She carried her head high; her hair was done in the shape of a helmet; she had brass leggings to the knee, brass wire gauntlets to the elbow, a crimson spot on her tawny cheek, innumerable necklaces of glass beads on her neck; bizarre things, charms, gifts of witch men, that hung about her, glittered and trembled at every step. . . . She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent.

– Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

She covered her arms, both of them were covered with rings and jewelry, accoutrements of black, Satanistic – please, I'm on TV.

– The 'Country Squire' in *Something Wild*

*Wild thing,
You make my heart sing.*

– The Troggs, *'Wild Thing'*

SINCE THE CAVALRY rode manfully across the cross-cutting to save Lillian Gish from blackness in *Birth of a Nation*, since Barbara Apollonia Chalupiec became Pola Negri and took up a position as Hollywood's resident Other, black sexuality, indeed anything other than white sexuality, has been both a potent threat and a powerful attraction in American film. Adopting a centuries old signification system, Hollywood from its beginnings linked racial difference to sexual danger. Danger, we saw, lurked in a capital-O Other: sexual transgression became Hollywood's darkest sin, and its surest box-office draw.

All this has a history, of course. *Othello*, Manet's *Olympia*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and most European travel writing up to this century link the non-white 'races' with a heightened sexuality as a matter of course. Anthropological and medical authorities at the turn of the century invented an evolutionary scale that placed Africans at the bot-

tom of humanity's ladder and Oxbridge-educated men at the top. One of the most important criteria was sex. To the nineteenth-century 'man of science', treading water between Darwin and Freud, sex was an important, but as yet fully untapped, well-spring of theory. With the unconscious still untheorised, he could only go about measuring genitalia and quantifying 'sex drives', with the conviction that the results would provide an indicator to one's position in the order of things. Black women never fared too well. Based on Hottentot physiology (as documented by European male scientists) it was deduced that the black female possessed 'not only a "primitive" sexual appetite but also the external signs of this temperament – "primitive" genitalia'¹. Black men, of course, were empirically proven to be endowed with oversized, 'primitive' sexual organs as well. Enlarged labia, big buttocks and monstrous penises loomed large in the nineteenth-century scientist's imagination as fearsome signifiers, signifiers of an animal-like hypersexuality that was threatening in its force.

Enter Jonathan Demme. Worlds away from the starched pseudoscience of the last century, he works in the world's biggest self-described melting pot, creating a reputation for hip, stylish films with more than the expected degree of subtlety. His performance films (*Stop Making Sense*, 1984, and *Swimming to Cambodia*, 1987) document pop group Talking Heads and 'performance artist' Spalding Gray using a controlled, unspectacular style. Demme's classification as one of the vanguard of New York film-makers – with Jim Jarmusch, John Sayles and Susan Seidelman, among others – stems from his choice of subject and certain tonal qualities in the films rather than formal innovation or complexity. The hallmark of these 'New York'² films is an almost ethnographic attitude towards the rest of the US, focusing with ironic fascination on middle-American popular culture, culture produced for the white working class outside the larger cities. Performance artist Laurie Anderson is, with the exception of comedian David Letterman, the New Yorker of her generation with the largest body of work in this vein. Her monologues and music exemplify the urban reaction to contemporary North American mass culture – deadpan mockery. Anderson's work quotes the detritus of this culture – advertising, television programmes, tabloid journalism, convenience stores – in an affectless style, putting kitsch in the context of conceptual art. There is, of course, an ambivalence in this sort of work. The ridicule that informs it is matched by nostalgia, and by a desire to make art out of the experience of popular culture. In Anderson, in Byrne, and in Jarmusch and Demme, one can detect an awkward celebration of the banal as perhaps the only reaction to a culture that exists for and through spectacle.

This critique of mass culture has an other – the overvaluing of marginal North American cultures.³ In Jarmusch's work, it is immigrants and the disenfranchised criminal class who are figured against the banality of white mass culture; in the work of Demme, Sayles and Byrne (in both music and film) it is most often black culture. Marginal cultures in

¹ Sander L. Gilman, 'Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature' in Henry Louis Gates Jr (ed), 'Race', *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, p 232.

² Films such as Jarmusch's *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law*, Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, David Byrne's *True Stories* and John Sayles' *Brother from Another Planet* are united in the North American public and critical consciousness not by their setting (often it is *not* New York), but by an ironic point of view associated with an urban sensibility. See 'Americarama at the Movies', a special section in the *Village Voice*, June 30, 1987.

³ This added aspect separates the pop culture nostalgia of New York films from their Hollywood counterparts. Films directed by Steven Spielberg, Robert Zemeckis or John Hughes, for example, also devote much screen time and emotional weight to the tokens of US popular culture. But these Hollywood-conceived films tend to locate pop culture on the private rather than public level – the home not the highway is the focus – and consumerism is generally endorsed rather than critiqued.

⁴ See Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Boston, 1965. See also Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, Cambridge, Mass., Belknap-Harvard University Press, 1968.

⁵ James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature and Art*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1988.

⁶ Clifford's 'other' exists not as an absolute, but as a network of aspects or choices. ' "Cultural difference" ' he writes, 'is no longer a stable, exotic otherness; self-other relations are matters of power and rhetoric rather than of essence' (p 14).

these films work as repositories of the real, the only place left to look for authentic experience.

It has long been an avant-garde tendency to situate itself between the original (shock, distanciation) and the banal (kitsch, pop culture).⁴ In playing US popular culture against 'exotic' cultures, the New York avant-garde is only following a pattern set in place by previous Western avant-gardes, including the North American beat poets and the French surrealists. In *The Predicament of Culture*⁵, US ethnographer James Clifford coins the phrase 'ethnographic surrealism', an apt term for the work of the New York avant-garde. Clifford traces the parallel histories of surrealism and ethnography in this century, and notes the similarities as well as the rather symmetrical differences between the two: one made the strange familiar, the other the familiar strange. 'Surrealism is ethnography's secret sharer', he argues (p 121); both negotiate the terrain of the exotic by means of forced juxtapositions. 'Ethnography, the science of cultural jeopardy, presupposes a constant willingness to be surprised, to unmake interpretive syntheses, and to value – when it comes – the unclassified, unsought other' (p 147).⁶ Films like *Something Wild*, while sharing some elements of ethnographic surrealism, are not nearly so sophisticated in their use of cultural difference as Clifford's prescription would dictate. *Something Wild* tends more toward simple xenophilia, an overvaluing of the 'authenticity' of black culture and a concomitant desire to possess and contain it.

'Loco De Amor': The Comic Pattern of 'Something Wild'

Contemporary reviews of *Something Wild* (released in North America in late 1986) stressed the tonal shift at its centre, which, in terms of its status as the product of a major US studio, is a significant element. The first half of the film follows the established trajectory of the screwball comedy, but the film radically thwarts generic expectations by introducing elements of psychological terror and graphic violence later on.

Charles Driggs (Jeff Daniels) is a young Manhattan businessman successful in the city's economic system (he has just been promoted to vice-president) but with a penchant for small social rebellions. One afternoon he is overseen by Lulu (Melanie Griffith) as he leaves a restaurant without paying. Lulu, a white woman wearing a black dress, a Louise Brooks haircut and African jewelry at her neck and arms, confronts Charlie in the street outside the restaurant, embarrassing him by threatening to expose his 'crime'. Lulu recognises Charlie's 'closet rebellion'; a link is formed between the two, and she offers him a ride back to work. Charlie accepts the ride, but instead Lulu drives them out of the city, first to a roadside motel where the two have sex, then to her mother's home in Pennsylvania. By this point the film has begun to make use of road movie conventions, with the plot hitched to a 'discovery' of North America.

Charlie's wife has left him several months previously, but he tells

Lulu that he is married. On the way to Pennsylvania, Lulu and Charlie develop a camaraderie, and Lulu ditches her New York clothes, changing to a simple print dress. Now reverting to her real name, Audrey, she presents Charlie to her mother as her husband. Audrey and Charlie then go to Audrey's high school reunion, with Charlie still masquerading as her husband. Charlie runs into a colleague from his office, and Audrey runs into Ray (Ray Liotta), her real husband, recently released from prison. Ray coerces Charlie and Audrey into a drive late at night, during which he robs a convenience store, injuring both the store clerk and Charlie. Back at Ray's home, the truth about Charlie's wife is revealed to Audrey. The lark now palpably over, Charlie leaves Ray and Audrey, makes his way back to Audrey's car and begins to drive back home. But the next morning he is following Ray and Audrey's car. Eventually he gets Audrey away from Ray, who is keeping her against her will, and the two drive back to his home on Long Island. Ray, furious, follows. He finds his way to Charlie's home, breaks in, and begins to terrorise both Charlie and Audrey. In an elaborately shot sequence, Charlie attempts to strangle Ray; he gets loose and is on the point of stabbing Charlie; Audrey saves Charlie by knocking the knife out of Ray's hands; Charlie picks it up, and Ray, rushing at Charlie, impales himself on the knife, fatally.

In the aftermath, Charlie quits his job, remaining obsessed with Audrey. He finds himself at the restaurant where they first met. In a reversal of the pattern at the film's start, Charlie pays his bill and leaves, but the waitress, Dottie, follows him out of the restaurant accusing him of not paying. He objects, then looks up to see Audrey, holding the bill with which he had paid. Audrey is now dressed 'retro' and driving a 1930s station wagon. She offers him a ride, and as they get into the car, the camera pans away to Dottie, who is now standing next to the restaurant's entrance, in the left side of the frame. She sings the closing song, a revamped, reggae version of 'Wild Thing'. The credits roll beside her.

The film begins (and was advertised) as a romantic comedy⁷, but the triad which structures the conflict in the first half of the film (Lulu-Charlie-the social) is replaced by a new one (Charlie-Audrey-Ray) when Lulu reverts to Audrey, and Ray is introduced. At that point Ray takes over the function of social disruption from Lulu, and Audrey becomes merely the prize in a conventional love triangle.

But *Something Wild*'s 'hipness' contributed to smoothing the ripples caused by its generic shifts. The perception of the film, especially in its second life as a video-cassette release, appears to be based on its status as the product of a coterie. For the initiate, *Something Wild* provides a compendium of in-jokes and familiar names: Laurie Anderson and John Cale scored the film, and Talking Heads' David Byrne performs the opening song with salsa star Celia Cruz. Cult directors John Waters and John Sayles appear in cameo roles, as does musician Steve Scales, who has performed and recorded with Talking Heads. And the two older women in the junk store where Charlie buys his first change of clothes are played by Dorothy Demme and Emma Byrne – the mothers of Jona-

⁷ Not only do the film's advertising poster, commercials and soundtrack album images not hint at the film's violence, nor do they present any images of 'Audrey'. The marketing of the film was in fact the marketing of the first half of the film, the exotic experience.

Something Wild: Lulu in black dress, with Louise Brooks haircut and African jewelry, dominating Charlie (above); Audrey terrorised by Ray (below).



than and David. The film's casting not only fosters an image of the New York avant-garde as a *community*, but also shows hip New Yorkers willing to dress up and play 'real Americans', producing a dual articulation where filmic 'reality' is deliberately undermined by the 'real-life' personas of the performers – as with any cameo performance, the wink to the audience is paramount. But such techniques do not work as alienation effects; instead, they remove the viewer from the level of the plot to the level of self-reflexive *entertainment*. They involve the viewer in the production of meaning (one must know the star to 'get' the cameo) and help to construct the viewer as a participant in the film's hipness, a partner in cool.

Yet, for all its urbanity, *Something Wild* cannot escape its own unease about blacks. It seems not to know what to do with them, so it strews

black faces across the background of the film, providing a literal local colour that adds to the film's hip credibility. Jim Hoberman notices this to be something common to the recent crop of 'hip' US features:

*The burden of Otherness is shouldered by blacks, and it's illuminating to ponder their role. Whether cast as **Blue Velvet's** blind seer or **True Stories's** voodoo priest, disguised as *Jarmusch's* nouveau White Negro or scattered over the landscape in **Something Wild**, this Other remains reproachful, unassimilated, establishing the margins of representation.⁸*

That almost every black we see in the film is linked with music – the rappers at the gas station, the man playing the blues harp outside the church, the church congregation itself, the young man at the beginning of the film carrying a huge portable radio, Dottie the waitress who sings the revised 'Wild Thing', and more – is an indication of the film's limited, voyeuristic approach to black culture. The blacks in the film might as well be shucking and jiving; certainly they are little more than decoration. Never far behind this black-as-exotic stereotype is the implication that the black is more primitive or animal-like. The predominant physical stereotypes of blacks, the stereotypes that still hold currency in North American film – bulging eyes, thick lips, wide noses, enlarged sexual organs – turn the black into a rampaging figure of excess sensuality. The senses admit more than is 'tasteful'; they are in bad taste because they are so *obvious*. The black's senses, in the white paradigm, consume too much.

The something 'wild' in the film is the presence of race (and, to some extent, class) that threatens to disrupt the domesticated, urban world represented by Charlie. That wildness is present not just in the black extras that populate the film, but also in the character of Lulu. Lulu is the element of wildness that catapults Charlie into chaos, and she is imaged (before she reverts to Audrey) as a white idea of an exotic, black woman, a wild thing, an unpredictable cipher.

The repetition of the words 'wild' and 'thing' in both the film's title and its theme song points up what is most threatening about the 'wildness' of race – it is unknown, indeterminate, a 'thing'. Inscrutability has always been an important element of the exotic, and the concept 'black' has traditionally been associated in Western culture with all that is evil and inscrutable. Blackness is inextricably linked with darkness, and darkness means the underworld, the fearsome, unknowable Other. Black, as concept, is not merely marginal to white, it is its antithesis. One might argue that 'black' and 'white' are only names, but names are important⁹; the abstraction of pink and brown people into polar opposites had its reasons and its results. As Jacques Derrida has argued¹⁰, Western metaphysics has always privileged one term in a binary opposition over the other; one need not reason long and hard to determine which term reigns in this pair.

Something Wild tries hard to close the gap between black and white, with ludicrous results. Ignoring the realities of North America's politi-

⁸ Jim Hoberman, 'What's Stranger than Paradise? Or, How We Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love the Burbs' in *Village Voice*, op cit, June 30, 1987, p 8.

⁹ Whether the name is Negro, Negre, Nero, Negerou, or Schwartzer, the connection between people of African descent and the colour (and concept) black is always explicit. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the derivation of Negro to the Latin *nigrum* or *niger*, meaning black.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1976.

¹¹ It's interesting to note that the reunion commemorates the 'Spirit of '76', because the screen representation cloaks itself in the same hypocrisy as the US bicentennial: confidence and an elaborately constructed sense of community whitewash a country spiralling into economic and spiritual decline.

cal and cultural polarisations, the white characters are extraordinarily (and unrealistically) sensitive to black culture. The middle-American store clerk played by Dorothy Demme wears a T-shirt advertising British reggae band Steel Pulse. The fantasy goes farther during the class reunion sequence. It is presented as a riot of racial intermingling, with interracial couples dancing contentedly, and gentle kibitzing between Charlie and a stagey black dancer, all culminating in Charlie's (pale) imitation of the moonwalk.¹¹ This strategy of making otherness accessible, of obliterating troubling differences is not just objectionable, it is dangerous. It is a profoundly conservative kind of wish-fulfilment to ignore the patterns of violence and resentment that inform relationships between blacks and whites in North America; the film's postcard view of blacks and black culture is a snapshot of *performance* – blacks dancing, singing and making jokes. I shall examine the way in which the film is organised to make otherness accessible, and acceptable, in a shot by shot analysis of three brief sequences.

I. Credit Sequence

1. A starfield rotates slowly counter-clockwise. A pattern of eight stars centre-frame gets brighter, recedes and moves frame left, and begins to rotate counter-clockwise forming an 'O'. Percussive latin music begins. The 'O' is followed by four other letters, spelling the word 'Orion', followed by the registered trademark sign.

2. A long-shot view of Manhattan taken from the river. The panorama travels right to left. A credit, 'Religioso Primitiva Presents', is low on the screen in yellow letters. It is replaced by the words 'Jeff Daniels Melanie Griffith'. The music builds to 'Loco De Amor', the film's 'overture' sung by David Byrne and Celia Cruz.

3-14. Other travelling shots of Manhattan from the rivers surrounding it, with credits superimposed.

15. Long shot of dilapidated building in the midground and the Manhattan skyline in the background. The camera tilts down and pans left to follow a young black man carrying a large portable stereo on his shoulder. His head and shoulders, framed by the stereo, are full-frame. Man and camera stop, and the words 'Directed by Jonathan Demme' are superimposed over the image of the man with the ghetto blaster. He turns in the direction of the camera, but does not address it. The man resumes walking and the camera resumes its pan, leaving the man behind and panning across the street to a long shot of a corner restaurant. During this last pan the 'overture' fades down.

1: The first shot of the film establishes its difference immediately. The Orion credit marks *Something Wild* as the product of a major American studio, but, by starting the latin music while the studio credit still occupies the screen, the film undermines the sanctity of the image (generally the studio image is like a publisher's imprint... a legal requirement and inviolable), locating the film slightly outside the studio

economy. The coincidental conjunction of the starfield image and the latin music, still a marker of exotica in mainstream North America, further locates the film 'out there'.

2-14: The shots of Manhattan from the river, exhaustive in number considering their relation to the *plot* of the film, have the effect of charting a conceptual space for the film. Little of it takes place in Manhattan, but it speaks from the cosmopolitanism commonly associated with the city. That the space is established by showing Manhattan at a distance, rather than details that would point to its urbanity suggests a desire to mystify Manhattan by totalising it. The music, again a combination of the white avant-garde (Byrne) and ethnic 'authenticity' (Cruz), and the film's first credit 'Religioso Primitiva Presents', reinforce commonly accepted images of Manhattan as a dense, and somewhat mysterious, cultural mélange. Only by immediately problematising Manhattan can the film proceed to leave its borders.

15: This shot is probably the most loaded one in the film, and certainly its interpretative key. From the Manhattan skyline the camera descends to the particular: a black man with a huge radio, a homogenised, drained icon of urban black American culture. The film then makes a bizarre link between Demme and black culture by superimposing his director's credit over this image. The camera movement stops to frame (and emphasise) the composite image: the credit for direction, carrying with it overtones of mastery and ownership, *superimposed* over the black man. Among other things, this shot establishes the relationship of exchange that will inform the film's approach to black culture. The fact that the man in this shot bears no narrative significance to the film marks it as an iconic image only. (As the camera pans away from the man to the restaurant the function of the image becomes clear.) The shot's framing, duration and focus mark the black icon as significant to the film. The director's credit, and the foregrounding of the look (again due in part to duration, framing and focus), establishes a relationship to the black subject of nearly clinical fetishism. The viewer is constructed as outside black culture, as is the director as offerer of the image: the black icon is produced and consumed within a white economy. The shot does not so much identify Demme with black culture as betray his intended dominance over it.

II. The Holland Tunnel

1. MCU of Charlie, in the passenger seat of Lulu's car as they leave Manhattan through the Holland Tunnel:

'If you don't turn around and take me back, you're gonna make me do something that I don't want to do.'

2. Cut to Lulu:

'I can hardly wait, Charlie.'

She reaches out of frame to turn on the car stereo, looking at Charlie as she does so. An African pop song rises on the soundtrack.

3. Cut to Charlie. He stares off frame at the stereo, then stares at Lulu, as if unnerved both by the music, sung in an African language, and by Lulu's ease with it.
 4. MLS. Front view of Lulu's car travelling through the tunnel. The music continues.
 5. CU of the dashboard of Lulu's car: on it are three small figures: one is a Buddha; the other two have the design of South American dolls. Another figure hangs out of focus from the rear-view mirror. Focus changes during this shot from the figures to the tunnel ahead.
 6. Cut to Lulu. She is moving back and forth in her seat to the rhythm of the music.
 7. Cut to Charlie. He looks at her, then looks away, covering his eyes and sighing with an expression that may convey regret or resignation.
 8. LS high angle of the car exiting the tunnel. A traffic sign in the right of the frame, prominent because of colour and composition, reads 'Wrong Way. Go Back'. The music fades.
- 1-8: The construction of Lulu as an exotic figure, and of Charlie as her straight other, is fairly obvious in this sequence. One might note, though, that Charlie and Lulu never share screen space in the tunnel scene, and that off-screen space, especially between shots 2 and 3, is figured as the zone where difference resides.

III. The Gas Station

1. MLS. Charlie exits from the gas station store, having just bought clothes and supplies. At the door is a group of four young black men rapping. The one nearest to Charlie raises his hand and Charlie raises his own defensively and backs away. Charlie approaches his car in the foreground and gets in, looking off-screen.
 2. MLS of Ray's car as it pulls out of the gas station across the street.
 3. Charlie pulls out, leaving the rappers in centre-frame. This shot dissolves into:
 4. A travelling shot of a highway and the railway lines beside it.
- 3-4: This shot and dissolve follow a pattern that the film sets up with the 'man with ghetto blaster' shot. An icon of black culture is offered to the viewer and then dispersed into the general setting of the film, in this case dissolved into the American landscape. In this case as in the first, there is always a neutral space between the scene of black culture and the scene of narrative action. The dissolve is not directly back to the plot's main agents, but to an empty road. In the first case the camera pans between the black man and the restaurant, with the two areas separated by seconds of empty space. Another scene begins with a close-up of an old black man playing a harmonica (again he has no function within the plot), and pans, shifting focus, to an establishing shot of Ray's car parked outside a motel.

The film's last such transition, to Dottie/Sister Carol as she sings the closing song, also crosses a neutral space. Within the film these pans

(and the dissolve) suggest that just out of frame, or just out of focus, is an 'authentic' world, a North American reference point against which to gauge the irrelevances of this plot and these characters. But this world is a stage, the blacks that populate it all performers. In all of the cases, music bridges the gap between these narrative and extra-narrative scenes.

IV. Lulu

With blacks existing only as performers in *Something Wild*, only to contrast their 'vitality' and 'essence' with the garish surfaces of middle-American mass culture, the only space for something approaching a multi-dimensional black character is filled by Lulu.

Within the context of the film, 'Lulu' functions as a palimpsest written over the Dottie character.¹² She is the politicised black female read through a white suburban sensibility – Audrey's. Dottie parades her politics on her body, wearing the red, gold, black and green of African liberation, her clothing a mix of sixties pacifism and black activism. Lulu's dress mimics Dottie's – she too wears the Ethiopian colours – but her excess of Africana (bracelets, necklaces, pendants, etc) moves past political commitment into the stylistic appropriation of fashion. She is decorated, a walking jangle of arty signifiers. Her pendant adorned with the image of the African continent, for example, literalises Freud's 'dark continent' metaphor.¹³ Her apartment, which we see only near the end of the film, is decorated in a sort of Afro-Christian postmodern style: Memphis-style colours and shapes provide the background for various collected icons.

The connection between Lulu and Dottie is cinematic as well as thematic. The film's first shot of Lulu (she is reading a biography of Frida Kahlo) is preceded immediately by an establishing shot of the restaurant interior, in which Dottie crosses in the foreground. As she exits the frame, leaving her trace upon the viewer, there is a cut to Lulu. And Lulu's first act is to impersonate Dottie – she takes on her function by stopping Charlie when he fails to pay his cheque (an action Dottie repeats at the end of the film).

Lulu, then, is not modelled on a general black woman; the film is rarely so crude as to present a single image as representative. Her model, Dottie, is an Afro-conscious, urban American, politicised black woman. But the parallels between the two women are accomplished almost solely through accoutrements – clothing, jewelry, etc. Beyond a sort of suburban anarchy, there is no indication that Audrey/Lulu is in any way politically aware.¹⁴ Lulu's 'blackness' is written in fashion symbols on the surface of her body, and as such, is as much about sex as it is about racial politics. Stereotypes of black women in Western culture tend to exist at the juncture of received ideas about blackness and about the feminine, and are therefore necessarily based in the body: the figure of the temptress or wanton woman, for example, is linked to the myth of

¹² The character called 'Lulu' of course draws on many other sources external to the film: Wedekind's original character, Louise Brooks, Frida Kahlo, and countless heroines of screwball comedies, where the force of the character's sexuality and desire also leads to social disruption.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, Standard Edition, trans James Strachey and Anna Freud, London, Hogarth, vol 20, p 212.

¹⁴ At the risk of psychologising Audrey, it seems more a rhetorical flourish than a narratively motivated action that she reads a biography of Winnie Mandela in one scene.

¹⁵ Kim Sawchuk, 'A Tale of Inscription/Fashion Statements', *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, vol 11, no 1-2, 1987, p 53.

black prurience; the 'maternal instinct' to the black's 'instinctive feel' for the rhythms of nature. Black women in Western literature, painting and film are thus imaged either as (large) intuitive mother figures, or as the human embodiment of animal sexuality. In both cases the physicality of the black woman is important; her body is the site of Western male projections of desire and repulsion. What that means in Lulu's case is that bodily decorations perform the function of sexual signs. This plays on the popularly held notion that an unadorned body is ascetic and desexualised, and that a profusion of jewelry and accessories possesses a fetishistic, sexual allure. Kim Sawchuk suggests that:

*fashionable behaviour is never simply a question of creativity or self-expression; it is also a mark of colonization, the anchoring of our bodies, particularly the bodies of women, into specific positions.*¹⁵

The position in Lulu's case can only be sexual.

Lulu is primarily *about* sex (from the position of active subject), while the Audrey to which she reverts is a victim, inscribed and proscribed by sex, but hardly sexual. In a standard conflation of a sexualised woman with a prostitute, Charlie momentarily misunderstands Lulu's intentions at the motel, but she reassures him: she wants money 'for the room. Everything else is free.' But when Lulu becomes Audrey, when she becomes 'white' again, her sexuality goes into remission; she becomes just another female plot device present to motivate the male characters' actions.

One can compare the seduction scene in the motel at the beginning of the film with Ray's rampage and murder at the film's end as an index of Audrey/Lulu's transition from subject to object. Lulu initiates the seduction, first by 'kidnapping' Charlie, then by ridding him of *his* accessories. If Lulu's trinkets and pendants are indicators of her sexuality, Charlie's telepager and umbrella and newspaper are regulators of desire, instruments of civilised order. If they are phallic it is in the sense of the Law, not the erotic. Charlie is in bondage throughout most of the film; the handcuffs he wears are only one symbol of that.

It is in the sex scene itself that the concern with 'ethnic' icons is most obvious. Lulu's anthropomorphic, blackface tape machine, the reggae she turns on to turn on to, and the carved fetish figure and gourd instrument she shakes at Charlie in mock menace all come weighed down with exotic significance; it is as if she is simultaneously assaulting and tantalising him with the Third World. If there is a motivation for the name of the film's production company – Religioso Primitiva – this is where it lies: Lulu's performance in this scene is a mix of voodoo totemism and sex trade tease. But the handcuffs are the central icon in this scene. Lulu pulls them from a watermelon-print bag and asks seductively, 'You game?' In fact it *is* a game, and like most games, includes a large measure of antagonism. Lulu's role in the game is to act 'wild', to threaten Charlie with 'uncivilised' forces, hence her comment 'You look good enough to eat', and her attempt to embarrass Charlie by calling his boss at work.

To the white, 'civilised' world as represented by Charlie, the intrusion of sex into corporate life, especially sex this illicit, constitutes the breaking of a taboo. And that puts it on a par with Lulu's threatened sexual cannibalism. Her function within the film, something common to screwball comedies, is to disrupt the social, to break the contracts that govern exchange. She does this through embarrassment: calling his office from the motel during sex, forcing him to run out on a cheque much larger than his lunch bill, embarrassing him with his co-worker, and so on. Both Ray and Lulu share a tendency toward sociopathic behaviour: Ray's manifests itself in violent crime, Lulu's in practical jokes.

Throughout the film, Charlie's body is violated as his familiar social world is broken down. Both in the sex scene and the final confrontation with Ray, he is thrown about, handcuffed, and acted upon in the aim of some transcendent goal – orgasm in one case, torture and murder in the other. In the second case Ray replaces Lulu/Audrey as the agent acting upon Charlie¹⁶: he handcuffs Charlie as she had; he throws Charlie onto the bathroom floor as she had thrown him onto the bed; he holds the anticipation of death over him as she had held the anticipation of orgasm – both insist on delaying it, on taking pleasure from Charlie's discomfort. There is even an identical use of handheld camera in the two scenes, although the later scene is on the whole more stylised, set in close-ups against the American Standard white of Charlie's spotless suburban bathroom. Charlie finally repays his tormentors by penetrating Ray – fatally. The figure of domesticity and 'civilisation' defeats his *doppelgänger* (compositions and dress make the similarities between Ray and Charlie especially clear in the bathroom scene); and the film constructs this as a transcendent, though touchingly tragic attainment of true masculinity. Ray's steel-capped black leather boots, his black handgun and black Cadillac had all served as symbols of his excess masculinity. Charlie's station wagon came up short (and limp) in comparison with Ray's rolling appendage. But Charlie, the hero in a fairly traditional narrative, triumphs, corresponding to a triumph of city over outland (or 'civilisation' over 'barbarism', an old struggle in North American culture), and dominant class over underclass in the film. That struggle is negotiated through the sexual token called Audrey, who acts as a sort of sliding signifier of resistance, crossing those rigid boundaries of place, race and class. She shifts easily from Manhattan to the outlands, from the world of her potty-genteel mother to Ray's rowhouse hell, and from an ersatz Dottie to an eighties Debbie Reynolds. Her final incarnation borrows from the upper-class style of another generation; she looks as if she had just stepped from a Scott Fitzgerald novel.

The white avant-garde positioning of ethnicity, particularly blackness, works, in *Something Wild* and elsewhere, to verify North American culture. Juxtaposing the spectacle, the simulacra of mass American culture with these 'pure' forms provides relief for the crisis in art: the sense that there is no longer an authentic referent. Black and Hispanic culture perform the same function for the US avant-garde that African culture

¹⁶ It would be facile to argue that Ray is also imaged as a black in the film, although there is some shading in that direction. He brags about returning unnoticed into a store he had just robbed: 'Half the time they thought it was some spook that did it'. Later he says, 'I used to spar around in the joint. It was just me and a bunch of the brothers'. If Ray is black-identified (his racist remarks suggest he is not), it is through the stereotypes of the black criminal and the black athlete. But Ray's disruptive force in the film is more the force of class difference. Ray invades the middle-class comfort that Charlie takes for granted, and that Audrey strives for. Like Dennis Hopper's character in *Blue Velvet*, he represents the nihilistic energy of the criminal class.

did for the surrealists. On the production side, it provides a new source, a source the artists seem to view as something that can be approached without irony or aesthetic exhaustion. In reception it is designed to shock, to displace the viewer (typically constructed as a member of the same race and class as the producers) from the play of surfaces that constitutes North American culture, and that provides the other term in the avant-garde dialectic.

But more importantly, the appropriation and circulation of images of black cultural practice by the white mainstream or the white avant-garde tend to *drain* the cultural forms, removing them from their social and political contexts, and presenting them as interesting ciphers, fascinating and unknowable. *Something Wild* takes part in the 'artefacting' of black culture, a process which necessarily returns to inflect both the practice of that culture, and its public reception. Through this cycle of appropriation and recirculation, black culture becomes *entirely* performative, resulting in images that make the black body *the* performing body, a body offered to a consuming, and largely unquestioning public.

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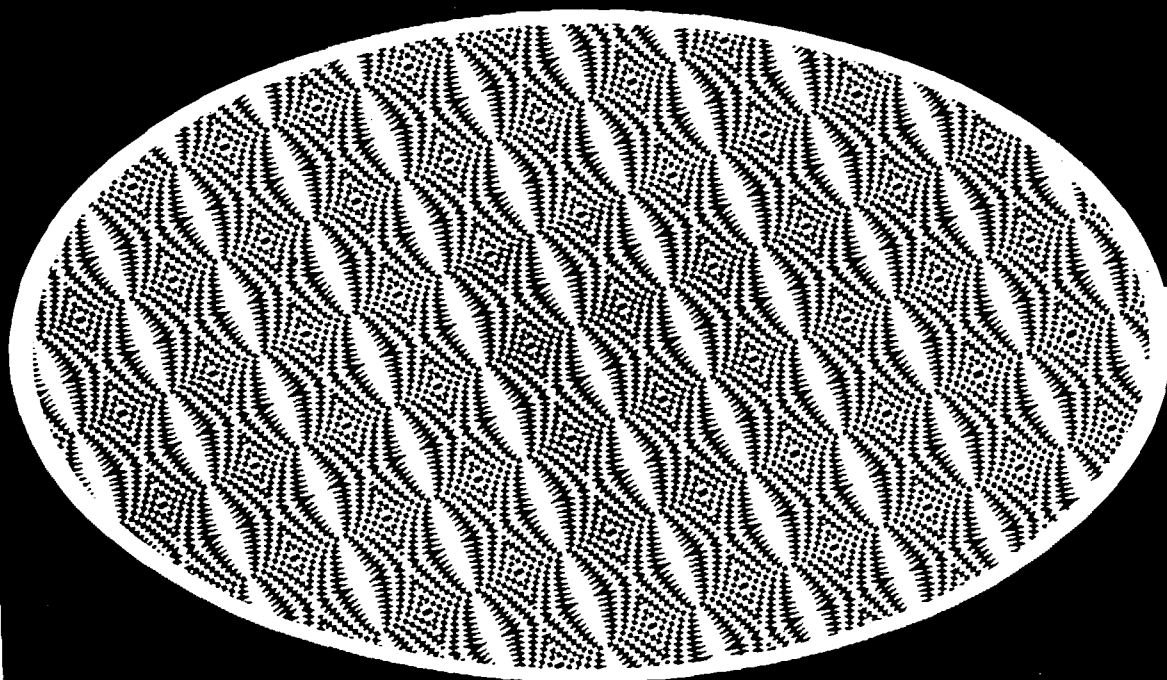
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WHITE

BY RICHARD DYER

THIS IS AN ARTICLE about a subject that, much of the time as I've been writing it, seems not to be there as a subject at all. Trying to think about the representation of whiteness as an ethnic category in mainstream film is difficult, partly because white power secures its dominance by seeming not to be anything in particular, but also because, when whiteness *qua* whiteness does come into focus, it is often revealed as emptiness, absence, denial or even a kind of death.

It is, all the same, important to try to make some headway with grasping whiteness as a culturally constructed category. 'Images of' studies have looked at groups defined as oppressed, marginal or subordinate – women, the working class, ethnic and other minorities (e.g., lesbians and gay men, disabled people, the elderly). The impulse for such work lies in the sense that how such groups are represented is part of the process of their oppression, marginalisation or subordination. The range and fertility of such work has put those groups themselves centre-stage in both analytical and campaigning activity, and highlighted the issue of representation as politics. It has, however, had one serious drawback, long recognised in debates about women's studies. Looking, with such passion and single-mindedness, at non-dominant groups has had the effect of reproducing the sense of the oddness, differentness, exceptionality of these groups, the feeling that they are departures from the norm. Meanwhile the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being human.

Some efforts are now being made to rectify this, to see that the norm too is constructed, although only with masculinity has anything approaching a proliferation of texts begun. Perhaps it is worth signalling here, before proceeding, two of the pitfalls in the path of such work, two convolutions that especially characterise male writing about masculinity – guilt and me too-ism. Let me state that, while writing here as a white person about whiteness, I do not mean either to display the expiation of my guilt about being white, nor to hint that it is also awful to be white

(because it is an inadequate, limiting definition of being human, because feeling guilty is such a burden). Studies of dominance by the dominant should not deny the place of the writer in relation to what s/he is writing about it, but nor should they be the green light for self-recrimination or trying to get in on the act.

Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior¹. This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. The very terms we use to describe the major ethnic divide presented by Western society, 'black' and 'white', are imported from and naturalised by other discourses. Thus it is said (even in liberal text books) that there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger, and that this explains racism (whereas one might well argue about the safety of the cover of darkness and the danger of exposure to the light); again, and with more justice, people point to the Judaeo-Christian use of white and black to symbolise good and evil, as carried still in such expressions as 'a black mark', 'white magic', 'to blacken the character' and so on.² I'd like to look at another aspect of commonsensical connotations of black and white as natural and ethnic categories by considering ideas of what colour is.

I was taught the scientific difference between black and white at primary school. It seemed a fascinating paradox. Black, which, because you had to add it to paper to make a picture, I had always thought of as a colour, was, it turned out, nothingness, the absence of all colour; whereas white, which looked just like empty space (or blank paper), was, apparently, all the colours there were put together. No doubt such explanations of colour have long been outmoded; what interests me is how they manage to touch on the construction of the ethnic categories of black and white in dominant representation. In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term 'coloured' egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularising; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours.

This property of whiteness, to be everything and nothing, is the source of its representational power. On the one hand, as one of the people in the video *Being White*³ observes, white domination is reproduced by the way that white people 'colonise the definition of normal'. Paul Gilroy similarly spells out the political consequences, in the British context, of the way that whiteness both disappears behind and is subsumed into other identities. He discusses the way that the language of 'the nation' aims to be unifying, permitting even socialists an appeal in terms of 'we' and 'our' 'beyond the margins of sectional interest', but goes on to observe that:

there is a problem in these plural forms: who do they include, or, more precisely for our purposes, do they help to reproduce blackness and Englishness

¹ cf, Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1964.

² cf, Winthrop Jordan, *White over Black*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969; Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, London, Pluto, 1984.

³ Made by Tony Dowmunt, Maris Clark, Rooney Martin and Kobena Mercer for Albany Video, London.

as mutually exclusive categories? . . . why are contemporary appeals to 'the people' in danger of transmitting themselves as appeals to the white people?⁴

On the other hand, if the invisibility of whiteness colonises the definition of other norms – class, gender, heterosexuality, nationality and so on – it also masks whiteness as itself a category. White domination is then hard to grasp in terms of the characteristics and practices of white people. No one would deny that, at the very least, there are advantages to being white in Western societies, but it is only avowed racists who have a theory which attributes this to inherent qualities of white people. Otherwise, whiteness is presented more as a case of historical accident, rather than a characteristic cultural/historical construction, achieved through white domination.

The colourless multi-colouredness of whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness. This, of course, also makes it hard to analyse. It is the way that black people are marked as black (are not just 'people') in representation that has made it relatively easy to analyse their representation, whereas white people – not there as a category and everywhere everything as a fact – are difficult, if not impossible, to analyse *qua* white. The subject seems to fall apart in your hands as soon as you begin. Any instance of white representation is always immediately something more specific – *Brief Encounter* is not about white people, it is about English middle-class people; *The Godfather* is not about white people, it is about Italian-American people; but *The Color Purple* is about black people, before it is about poor, southern US people.

This problem clearly faced the makers of *Being White*, a pioneering attempt to confront the notion of white identity. The opening vox pop sequence vividly illustrates the problem. Asked how they would define themselves, the white interviewees refer easily to gender, age, nationality or looks but never to ethnicity. Asked if they think of themselves as white, most say that they don't, though one or two speak of being 'proud' or 'comfortable' to be white. In an attempt to get some white people to explore what being white means, the video assembles a group to talk about it and it is here that the problem of white people's inability to see whiteness appears intractable. Sub-categories of whiteness (Irishness, Jewishness, Britishness) take over, so that the particularity of whiteness itself begins to disappear; then gradually, it seems almost inexorably, the participants settle in to talking with confidence about what they know: stereotypes of black people.

Yet perhaps this slide towards talking about blackness gives us a clue as to where we might begin to see whiteness – where its difference from blackness is inescapable and at issue. I shall look here at examples of mainstream cinema whose narratives are marked by the fact of ethnic difference. Other approaches likely to yield interesting results include: the study of the characterisation of whites in Third World or diaspora cinema; images of the white race in avowedly racist and fascist cinema; the use of the 'commutation test'⁵, the imaginary substitution of black

⁴ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*, London, Hutchinson, 1987, pp 55-56. See also the arguments about feminism and ethnicity in Hazel Carby, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood' in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back*, London, Hutchinson, 1982, pp 212-23.

⁵ John O Thompson, 'Screen Acting and the Commutation Test', *Screen Summer* 1978, vol 19 no 2, pp 55-70.

for white performers in films such as *Brief Encounter*, say, or *Ordinary People* (if these are unimaginable played by black actors, what does this tell us about the characteristics of whiteness?) or, related to this, consideration of what ideas of whiteness are implied by such widespread observations as that Sidney Poitier or Diana Ross, say, are to all intents and purposes 'white'. What all these approaches share, however, is reference to that which is not white, as if only non-whiteness can give whiteness any substance. The reverse is not the case – studies of images of blacks, Native Americans, Jews and other ethnic minorities do not need the comparative element that seems at this stage indispensable for the study of whites.

The representation of white *qua* white begins to come into focus – in mainstream cinema, for a white spectator – in films in which non-white characters play a significant role. I want to look at three very different examples here – *Jezebel* (USA, Warner Brothers, 1938), *Simba* (GB, Rank Studios, 1955) and *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1969). Each is characteristic of the particular genre and period to which it belongs. *Jezebel* is a large-budget Hollywood feature film (said to have been intended to rival *Gone with the Wind*) built around a female star, Bette Davis; its spectacular pleasures are those of costume and decor, of gracious living, and its emotional pleasures those of tears. *Simba* is a film made as part of Rank's bid to produce films that might successfully challenge Hollywood at the box office, built around a male star, Dirk Bogarde; its spectacular pleasures are those of the travelogue, its emotional ones excitement and also the gratification of seeing 'issues' (here, the Mau-Mau in Kenya) being dealt with. *Night of the Living Dead* is a cheap, independently-produced horror film with no stars; its spectacular and emotional pleasures are those of shock, disgust and suspense, along with the evident political or social symbolism that has aided its cult reputation.

The differences between the three films are important and will inform the ways in which they represent whiteness. There is some point in trying to see this continuity across three, nonetheless significantly different, films. There is no doubt that part of the strength and resilience of stereotypes of non-dominant groups resides in their variation and flexibility – stereotypes are seldom found in a pure form and this is part of the process by which they are naturalised, kept alive.⁶ Yet the strength of white representation, as I've suggested, is the apparent absence altogether of the typical, the sense that being white is co-terminous with the endless plenitude of human diversity. If we are to see the historical, cultural and political limitations (to put it mildly) of white world domination, it is important to see similarities, typicalities, within the seemingly infinite variety of white representation.

All three films share a perspective that associates whiteness with

⁶ See T E Perkins, 'Rethinking Stereotypes' in Michele Barrett et al (eds), *Representation and Cultural Practice*, New York, Croom Helm, pp 135-59; Steve Neale, 'The Same Old Story', *Screen Education* Autumn/Winter 1979/80, nos 32-33, pp 33-38. For a practical example see the British Film Institute study pack, *The Dumb Blonde Stereotype*.

order, rationality, rigidity, qualities brought out by the contrast with black disorder, irrationality and looseness. It is their take on this which differs. *Simba* operates with a clear black-white binarism, holding out the possibility that black people can learn white values but fearing that white people will be engulfed by blackness. *Jezebel* is far more ambivalent, associating blackness with the defiance of its female protagonist – whom it does not know whether to condemn or adore. *Night* takes the hint of critique of whiteness in *Jezebel* and takes it to its logical conclusion, where whiteness represents not only rigidity but death.

What these films also share, which helps to sharpen further the sense of whiteness in them, is a situation in which white domination is contested, openly in the text of *Simba* and explicitly acknowledged in *Jezebel*. The narrative of *Simba* is set in motion by the Mau-Mau challenge to British occupation, which also occasions set pieces of debate on the issues of white rule and black responses to it; the imminent decline of slavery is only once or twice referred to directly in *Jezebel*, but the film can assume the audience knows that slavery was soon ostensibly to disappear from the southern states. Both films are suffused with the sense of white rule being at an end, a source of definite sorrow in *Simba*, but in *Jezebel* producing that mixture of disapproval and nostalgia characteristic of the white representation of the ante-bellum South. *Night* makes no direct reference to the state of ethnic play but, as I shall argue below, it does make implicit reference to the black uprisings that were part of the historical context of its making, and which many believed would alter irrevocably the nature of power relations between black and white people in the USA.

The presence of black people in all three films allows one to see whiteness as whiteness, and in this way relates to the existential psychology that is at the origins of the interest in 'otherness' as an explanatory concept in the representation of ethnicity.⁷ Existential psychology, principally in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, had proposed a model of human growth whereby the individual self becomes aware of itself as a self by perceiving its difference from others. It was other writers who suggested that this process, supposedly at once individual and universal, was in fact socially specific – Simone de Beauvoir arguing that it has to do with the construction of the male ego, Frantz Fanon relating it to the colonial encounter of white and black. What I want to stress here is less this somewhat metaphysical dimension⁸, more the material basis for the shifts and anxieties in the representation of whiteness suggested by *Simba*, *Jezebel* and *Night*.

The three films relate to situations in which whites hold power in society, but are materially dependent upon black people. All three films suggest an awareness of this dependency – weakly in *Simba*, strongly but still implicitly in *Jezebel*, inescapably in *Night*. It is this actual dependency of white on black in a context of continued white power and privilege that throws the legitimacy of white domination into question. What is called for is a demonstration of the virtues of whiteness that would justify continued domination, but this is a problem if whiteness is

⁷ See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, London, Pluto, 1986; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978; Homi K Bhabha, 'The Other Question – the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 18-36.

⁸ See Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse', *Oxford Literary Review*, vol 9, nos 1-2, 1987, pp 27-58.

also invisible, everything and nothing. It is from this that the films' fascinations derive. I shall discuss them here in the order in which they most clearly attempt to hang on to some justification of whiteness, starting, then, with *Simba* and ending with *Night*.

'Simba'

Simba is a characteristic product of the British cinema between about 1945 and 1965 – an entertainment film 'dealing with' a serious issue.⁹ It is a colonial adventure film, offering the standard narrative pleasures of adventure with a tale of personal growth. The hero, Alan (Bogarde), arrives in Kenya from England to visit his brother on his farm, finds he has been killed by the Mau-Mau and stays to sort things out (keep the farm going, find out who killed his brother, quell the Mau-Mau). Because the Mau-Mau were a real administrative and ideological problem for British imperialism at the time of the film's making, *Simba* also has to construct a serious discursive context for these pleasures (essentially a moral one, to do with the proper way to treat native peoples; toughness versus niceness). It does this partly through debates and discussions, partly through characters clearly representing what the film takes to be the range of possible angles on the subject (the bigoted whites, the liberal whites, the British-educated black man, the despotic black chief) but above all through the figure of the hero, whose adventures and personal growth are occasioned, even made possible, through the process of engaging with the late colonial situation. The way this situation is structured by the film and the way Alan/Bogarde rises to the occasion display the qualities of whiteness.

Simba is founded on the 'Manicheism delirium' identified by Frantz Fanon as characteristic of the colonialist sensibility¹⁰; it takes what Paul Gilroy refers to as an 'absolutist view of black and white cultures, as fixed, mutually impermeable expressions of racial and national identity, [which] is a ubiquitous theme in racial "common sense"'¹¹. The film is organised around a rigid binarism, with white standing for modernity, reason, order, stability, and black standing for backwardness, irrationality, chaos and violence. This binarism is reproduced in every detail of the film's *mise-en-scène*. A sequence of two succeeding scenes illustrates this clearly – a meeting of the white settlers to discuss the emergency, followed by a meeting of the Mau-Mau. The whites' meeting takes place in early evening, in a fully lit room; characters that speak are shot with standard high key lighting so that they are fully visible; everyone sits in rows and although there is disagreement, some of it hot-tempered and emotional, it is expressed in grammatical discourse in a language the British viewer can understand; moreover, the meeting consists of nothing but speech. The black meeting, on the other hand, takes place at dead of night, out of doors, with all characters in shadow; even the Mau-Mau leader is lit with extreme sub-Expressionist lighting that dramatises and distorts his face; grouping is in the form of a broken, uneven

⁹ See John Hill, *Sex, Class and Realism*, London, British Film Institute, 1986, chaps 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Frantz Fanon, *op cit*, p 183.

¹¹ Paul Gilroy, *op cit*, p 61; see Errol Lawrence, 'In the Abundance of Water the Fool is Thirsty: Sociology and Black Pathology', in *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies*, *op cit*, pp 95-142.

Binarism in *Simba's*
mise-en-scène: white
culture (above) and
black culture (below).



circle; what speech there is is ritualised, not reasoned, and remains untranslated (and probably in no authentic language anyway), and most vocal sounds are whooping, gabbling and shrieking; the heart of the meeting is in any case not speech, but daubing with blood and entrails and scarring the body. The return to whiteness after this sequence is once again a return to daylight, a dissolve to the straight lines of European fencing and vegetable plots.

The emphasis on the visible and bounded in this *mise-en-scène* (main-

tained throughout the film) has to do with the importance of fixity in the stereotyping of others – clear boundaries are characteristic of things white (lines, grids, not speaking till someone else has finished and so on), and also what keeps whites clearly distinct from blacks. The importance of the process of boundary establishment and maintenance has long been recognised in discussions of stereotyping and representation.¹² This process is functional for dominant groups, but through it the capacity to set boundaries becomes a characteristic attribute of such groups, endlessly reproduced in ritual, costume, language and, in cinema, *mise-en-scène*. Thus, whites and men (especially) become characterised by ‘boundariness’.¹³

Simba’s binarism is in the broadest sense racist, but not in the narrower sense of operating with a notion of intrinsic and unalterable biological bases for differences between peoples.¹⁴ It is informed rather by a kind of evolutionism, the idea of a path of progress already followed by whites, but in principle open to all human beings – hence the elements in the binarism of modernity versus backwardness. Such evolutionism raises the possibility of blacks becoming like whites, and it is the belief in this possibility that underpins the views of the liberal characters in the film, Mary (Virginia McKenna) and Dr Hughes (Joseph Tomelty), the latter pleading with his fellow settlers at the meeting to ‘reason’, not with the Mau-Mau but with the other Africans, who are not beyond the reach of rational discussion. The possibility is further embodied in the character of Peter Karanja (Earl Cameron), the son of the local chief (Orlando Martins), who has trained to be a doctor and is now running a surgery in the village. The film is at great pains to establish that Peter is indeed reasonable, rational, humane, liberal. It is always made quite clear to the viewer that this is so and the representatives of liberalism always believe in him; it is the whites who do not trust him, and one of Alan’s moral lessons is in learning to respect Peter’s worth. It seems then that part of the film is ready to take the liberal evolutionist position. Yet it is also significant that the spokespeople for liberalism (niceness and reason) are socially subordinate; a woman and an Irish doctor (played for comic eccentricity most of the time), and that liberalism fails, with its representatives (Mary, Peter and now won-over Alan) left at the end of the film crouched in the flames of Alan’s farm, rescued from the Mau-Mau in the nick of time by the arrival of the white militia, and Peter dying from wounds inflicted on him by the Mau-Mau (represented as a black mob). Although with its head, as it were, the film endorses the possibility of a black person becoming ‘white’, this is in fact deeply disturbing, setting in motion the anxiety attendant on any loosening of the fixed visibility of the colonised other. This anxiety is established from the start of the film and is the foundation of its narrative.

As is customary in colonial adventure films, *Simba* opens with a panoramic shot of the land, accompanied here by birdsong and the sound of an African man singing. While not especially lush or breathtaking, it is peaceful and attractive. A cry of pain interrupts this mood and we see the man who has been singing stop, get off his bicycle and walk towards

¹² e.g., Homi Bhabha, *op cit*; Richard Dyer, ‘Stereotyping’ in Richard Dyer (ed), *Gays and Film*, London, British Film Institute, 1977, pp 27-39; Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985.

¹³ cf, Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978.

¹⁴ Michael Banton, *The Idea of Race*, London, Tavistock, 1977; this restrictive definition of racism has been disputed by, inter alia, Stuart Hall, ‘Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance’ in UNESCO, *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism*, Paris, UNESCO, 1980.

its source to find a white man lying covered in blood on the ground. The black man kneels by his side, apparently about to help him, but then, to the sound of a drum-roll on the soundtrack, draws his machete and plunges it (off screen) into the wounded man. He then walks back to his bike and rides off. Here is encapsulated the fear that ensues if you can't see black men behaving as black men should, the deceptiveness of a black man in Western clothes riding a bike. This theme is then reiterated throughout the film. Which of the servants can be trusted? How can you tell who is Mau-Mau and who not? Why should Alan trust Peter?

This opening sequence is presented in one long take, using panning. As the man rides off, the sound of a plane is heard, the camera pans up and there is the first cut of the film, to a plane flying through the clouds. There follows (with credits over) a series of aerial shots of the African landscape, in one of which a plane's shadow is seen, and ending with shots of white settlement and then the plane coming to land. Here is another aspect of the film's binarism. The credit sequence uses the dynamics of editing following the more settled feel of the pre-credit long take; it uses aerial shots moving through space, rather than pans with their fixed vantage point; it emphasises the view from above, not that from the ground, and the modernity of air travel after the primitivism of the machete. It also brings the hero to Africa (as we realise when we see Bogarde step off in the first post-credit shot), brings the solution to the problems of deceptive, unfixed appearances set up by the pre-credit sequence.

Simba's binarism both establishes the differences between black and white and creates the conditions for the film's narrative pleasures – the disturbance of the equilibrium of clear-cut binarism, the resultant conflict that the hero has to resolve. His ability to resolve it is part of his whiteness, just as whiteness is identified in the dynamism of the credit sequence (which in turn relates to the generic expectations of adventure) and in the narrative of personal growth that any colonial text with pretensions also has. The Empire provided a narrative space for the realisation of manhood, both as action and maturation.¹⁵ The colonial landscape is expansive, enabling the hero to roam and giving us the entertainment of action; it is unexplored, giving him the task of discovery and us the pleasures of mystery; it is uncivilised, needing taming, providing the spectacle of power; it is difficult and dangerous, testing his machismo, providing us with suspense. In other words, the colonial landscape provides the occasion for the realisation of white male virtues, which are not qualities of being but of doing – acting, discovering, taming, conquering. At the same time, colonialism, as a social, political and economic system, even in fictions, also carries with it challenges of responsibility, of the establishment and maintenance of order, of the application of reason and authority to situations. These, too, are qualities of white manhood that are realised in the process of the colonial text, and very explicitly in *Simba*. When Alan arrives at Nairobi, he is met by Mary, a woman to whom he had proposed when she was visiting England; she

¹⁵ cf, Stuart Hall, 'The Whites of their Eyes: Racist Ideologies and the Media' in George Bridges and Rosalind Brunt (eds), *Silver Linings*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1981, pp 28-52.

had turned him down, telling him, as he recalls on the drive to his brother's farm, that he had 'no sense of responsibility'. Now he realises that she was right; in the course of the film he will learn to be responsible in the process of dealing with the Mau-Mau, and this display of growth will win him Mary.

But this is a late colonial text, characterised by a recognition that the Empire is at an end, and not unaware of some kinds of liberal critique of colonialism. So *Simba* takes a turn that is far more fully explored by, say, *Black Narcissus* (1947) or the Granada TV adaptation of *The Jewel in the Crown* (1982). Here, maturity involves the melancholy recognition of failure. This is explicitly stated, by Sister Clodagh in *Black Narcissus*, to be built into the geographical conditions in which the nuns seek to establish their civilising mission ('I couldn't stop the wind from blowing'); it is endlessly repeated by the nice whites in *The Jewel in the Crown* ('There's nothing I can do!') and symbolised in the lace shawl with butterflies 'caught in the net' that keeps being brought out by the characters. I have already suggested the ways in which liberalism is marginalised and shown to fail in *Simba*. More than this, the hero also fails to realise the generically promised adventure experiences: he is unable to keep his late brother's farm going, nor does he succeed in fighting off a man stealing guns from his house; he fails to catch the fleeing leader of the Mau-Mau, and is unable to prevent them from destroying his house and shooting Peter. The film ends with his property in flames and – a touch common to British social conscience films – with a shot of a young black boy who symbolises the only possible hope for the future.

The repeated failure of narrative achievement goes along with a sense of white helplessness in the face of the Mau-Mau (the true black threat), most notably in the transition between the two meeting scenes discussed above. Alan has left the meeting in anger because one of the settlers has criticised the way his brother had dealt with the Africans (too soft); Mary joins him, to comfort him. At the end of their conversation, there is a two-shot of them, with Mary saying of the situation, 'it's like a flood, we're caught in it'. This is accompanied by the sound of drums and is immediately followed by a slow dissolve to black people walking through the night towards the Mau-Mau meeting. The drums and the dissolve enact Mary's words, that the whites are helpless in the face of the forces of blackness.

Simba is, then, an endorsement of the moral superiority of white values of reason, order and boundedness, yet suggests a loss of belief in their efficacy. This is a familiar trope of conservatism. At moments, though, there are glimpses of something else, achieved inadvertently perhaps through the casting of Dirk Bogarde. It becomes explicit in the scene between Mary and Alan just mentioned, when Alan says to Mary, 'I was suddenly afraid of what I was feeling', referring to the anger and hatred that the whole situation is bringing out in him and, as Mary says, everyone else. The implication is that the situation evokes in whites the kind of irrational violence supposedly specific to blacks. Of course, being white means being able to repress it and this is what we seem to

¹⁶ See Andy Medhurst, 'Dirk Bogarde' in Charles Barr, *All Our Yesterdays*, London, British Film Institute, 1986, pp 346-54.

see in Alan throughout the film. Such repression constitutes the stoic glory of the imperial hero, but there is something about Bogarde in the part that makes it seem less than admirable or desirable. Whether this is suggested by his acting style, still and controlled, yet with fiercely grinding jaws, rigidly clenched hands and very occasional sudden outbursts of shouting, or by the way Rank was grooming him against the grain of his earlier, sexier image (including its gay overtones)¹⁶, it suggests a notion of whiteness as repression that leads us neatly on to *Jezebel*.

'Jezebel'

Like *Simba*, *Jezebel* depicts a white society characterised by order and rigidity, here expressed principally through codes of behaviour and rules of conduct embodied in set-piece receptions, dinner parties and balls. This does contrast with the bare glimpses we get of black life in the film, but *Jezebel* also explores the ways in which whiteness is related to blackness, materially and emotionally dependent on it yet still holding sway over it.

Compositionally, *Jezebel* frequently foregrounds black people – scenes often open with the camera moving from a black person (a woman selling flowers in New Orleans, a servant carrying juleps, a boy pulling on a rope to operate a ceiling fan) across or towards white characters; black people often intrude into the frame while white characters talk. This is particularly noticeable during a dinner-table discussion of the future of slavery; when one of the characters, Pres (Henry Fonda), says that the South will be defeated by machines triumphing over 'unskilled slave labour', the chief black character, Cato (Lou Payton), leans across our field of



A set piece dinner party in *Jezebel*: whiteness dependent on blackness, yet holding sway over it.



A black character intruding in the frame, while white people talk: selling flowers in New Orleans.

vision to pour Pres' wine, literally embodying the fact of slave labour. The film's insistence upon the presence of black people is important in its perception and construction of the white South. As Jim Pines puts it, 'black characters do not occupy a significant dramatic function in the film, but their social role nevertheless plays an explicit and relevant part in the conflict that arises between the principal white characters'¹⁷.

Jezebel is distantly related, through the sympathies of its stars, director and production studio, to progressive ideas on race, making it, as Pines says, 'within the plantation movie tradition . . . undoubtedly the most liberal-inclined'¹⁸. These ideas have to do with the belief or suspicion that black people have in some sense more 'life' than whites. This idea, and its ambivalences, have a very long history which cannot detain us here. It springs from ideas of the closeness of non-European (and even non-metropolitan) peoples to nature, ideas which were endemic to those processes of European expansion variously termed exploration, nation-building and colonialism.¹⁹ Expansion into other lands placed the humans encountered there as part of the fauna of those lands, to be construed either as the forces of nature that had to be subjugated or, for liberals, the model of sweet natural Man uncontaminated by civilisation. At the same time, ideas of nature have become central to Western thought about being human, such that concepts of human life itself have become inextricable from concepts of nature. Thus the idea that non-whites are more natural than whites also comes to suggest that they have more 'life', a logically meaningless but commonsensically powerful notion.

Jezebel relates to a specific liberal variation on this way of thinking, a tradition in which *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Harlem Renaissance are key reference points²⁰, as is the role of Annie in Sirk's *Imitation of Life*.²¹ Ethel Mannin's statement may be taken as emblematic:

¹⁷ Jim Pines, *Blacks in Films*, London, Studio Vista, 1975, p 54.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p 55. See also Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp 299, 304.

¹⁹ See Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism*, London, Zed Books, 1983.

²⁰ See George Frederickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind*, New York, Harper and Row, 1972; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, New York, Knopf, 1981.

²¹ I have discussed this in 'Four Films of Lana Turner', *Movie*, no 25, pp 30-52.

²² Ethel Mannin, *Confessions and Impressions*, New York, Doubleday, Doran, 1930, p 157.

²³ Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p 214.

*It is of course that feeling for life which is the secret of the Negro people, as surely as it is the lack of it, and slow atrophy of the capacity to live emotionally, which will be the ultimate decadence of the white civilised people.*²²

'Life' here tends to mean the body, the emotions, sensuality and spirituality; it is usually explicitly counterposed to the mind and the intellect, with the implication that white people's over-investment in the cerebral is cutting them off from life and leading them to crush the life out of others and out of nature itself. The implicit counterposition is, of course, 'death', a point to which I shall return in the discussion of *Night of the Living Dead*.

Jezebel is generally, and rightly, understood to be about the taming of a woman who refuses to live by the Old South's restrictive codes of femininity. It is a clear instance of Molly Haskell's characterisation of one of the available models for strong women's roles in classic Hollywood movies, the 'superfemale', who is 'too ambitious and intelligent for the docile role society has decreed she play' but remains 'exceedingly "feminine" and flirtatious' and 'within traditional society', turning her energies on those around her, 'with demonic results'.²³ Davis' character, Julie, is strong, defiant of convention (for example, striding into the bank, a place that women do not enter), refusing to behave in the genteel way her fiancé, Pres, requires of her. The trajectory of the narrative is her punishment and moral growth, in two stages. She learns to conceal her defiance and energy beneath an assumption of femininity, but this is still not enough, since it is still there in the malignant form indicated by Haskell; it is only by literally sacrificing herself (accompanying Pres, who has caught yellow jack fever, to Red Island, where fever victims are isolated) that the film is able to reach a satisfactory, transcendantly punishing climax. All of this is entirely understandable within a gender frame of reference; but the film also relates Julie's energies to blackness, suggesting that her trajectory is a specifically white, as well as female, one.

The most famous scene in the film is the Olympus Ball, at which all the unmarried women wear white. Julie, to embarrass Pres and to cock a snook at out-dated convention ('This is 1852, not the Dark Ages – girls don't have to simper about in white just 'cos they're not married'), decides to wear a red dress. The immediate scandal is not just the refusal to conform and uphold the celebration of virginity that the white dress code represents, but the sexual connotations of the dress itself, satin and red, connotations made explicit in a scene at the dress-maker's ('Saucy, isn't it?', says Julie; 'And vulgar', says her aunt, with which Julie enthusiastically concurs). This is the dress of Julie's that her black maid Zette (Theresa Harris) most covets, and after the ball, Julie gives it to her. It is precisely its *colourfulness* that, stereotyping informs us, draws Zette – the dress is 'marked' as coloured, a definite, bold colour heightened by a flashy fabric, just as black representation is. Thus what appears to be symbolism (white for virginity, colour for sex) within a universally applicable communication circuit becomes ethnically specific. The primary association of white with chastity is inextricably tied to not



Flouting convention:
the red dress at the
Olympus Ball.

being dark and colourful, not being non-white, and the defiance and vitality narratively associated with Julie's wearing of the dress is associated with the qualities embodied by black women, qualities that Julie as a white woman must not display, or even have. Of course, the red dress looks merely dark in this black and white film.

Wearing the dress causes a rift between Julie and Pres; shortly after, he leaves for the North on business. By the time he returns, Julie has learned to behave as a white woman should. Once again, the specific whiteness of this is revealed through the figure of Zette. There is, for instance, a scene in which Julie is getting ready for the arrival of Pres at a house party at her aunt's plantation. In her room she moves restlessly about, with Zette hanging on to her as she tries to undo Julie's dress at the back; Zette's movements are entirely determined by Julie's but Zette is attending to the basic clothing while Julie is just fussing about. When Julie thinks she hears a carriage coming, she sends Zette to check; Zette runs from the room, and the film cuts to the huge hallway, showing us all of Zette's rapid descent of the stairs and run to the door, before cutting again to show her calling out to the man and boy in livery waiting for carriages at the gate. This apparently unnecessarily elongated sequence not only helps whip up excitement and anticipation at Pres' arrival, but also gives Julie time to take off one dress and put on another, a potentially titillating sight that would not be shown in this kind of film in this period. But using a sequence centred on a black woman is not only a device to heighten suspense and by-pass a taboo image – it works as seamlessly well as it does because it is also appropriate to show a black woman here.

By this stage in the film, Julie has learned the behaviour appropriate to a

white woman in her position. Earlier in the film she openly expressed her passion and defiance; now, awaiting Pres, she has learned to behave as she should. She no longer expresses feeling – she ‘lives’ through Zette. Zette has to express excited anticipation, not in speech, but in physical action, running the length of a long stair and spacious hallway. It is Zette’s excited body in action that we see, instead of Julie’s body disrobed and enrobed. When Julie hears the servants at the gate call out, ‘Carriage is coming!’, she sends Zette to the window to see if it is Pres. The excitement mounts as the carriage draws near. There is a rapid montage of black people: Zette shot from below at a dynamic angle looking for the carriage, the servants at the gate no longer still but the man moving about, the boy leaping in anticipation, and crowds of hitherto unseen black children running to the gate, jumping and cavorting. Meanwhile Julie remains perfectly still, only her eyes, in characteristic Davis fashion, darting and dilating with suspense; perfectly, luminously lit, she says nothing, expresses nothing with her body – it is black people who bodily express her desire.

This use of black people to express, to ‘live’, the physical dimension of Julie’s life is found throughout the film, most notably after her manipulations have gone awry to the point that one of her old flames, Buck (George Brent), is now about to duel with Pres’ brother. The black plantation workers have gathered at the house to entertain the white guests (‘a quaint old custom down here’, says Julie to Pres’ new, and Northern, wife, Amy). As they arrive they sing a song about marrying, heard over shots of Julie, a bitterly ironic counterpoint. She shushes the chorus and tells them to start singing, ‘Gonna Raise a Ruckus To-night’, then goes to the edge of the verandah and sits down, beckoning the black children to gather close round her, before joining in with the singing. The song is a jolly one and the shots of the black singers show them in happy-go-lucky Sambo style, but the last shot of the sequence closes on Julie, near to tears against the sound of this cheerful singing. The power of the sequence does not come from this ironic counterpoint alone, but also from the way that Julie, by merging as nearly as possible with the singers and joining in the song, is able to express her pent-up feelings of frustration, anger, jealousy and fear, feelings for which there is no white mode of expression, which can only be lived through blacks.

The point of *Jezebel* is not that whites are different from blacks, but that whites live by different rules. Unlike the two women with whom she is compared, her aunt and Amy, Julie cannot be ‘white’. It is her aunt and Amy who confirm that whites are calm, controlled, rational; Julie transgresses, but in the process reveals white calm as an imposition, a form of repression of life. The film’s ambivalence lies in its being a vehicle for Davis. She/Julie is a ‘Jezebel’, a by-word for female wickedness, but nonetheless a star with a huge female following, and who is shot here with the kind of radiance and glow Hollywood reserved for its favoured women stars. There is no doubt that what Julie does is wicked and that her punishment is to be understood as richly deserved; but there is also no doubt that she is to be adored and precisely, as I’ve tried



Julie with the plantation workers gathered to entertain her guests

to argue, because she does not conform to notions of white womanhood.

'Night of the Living Dead'

If blacks have more 'life' than whites, then it must follow that whites have more 'death' than blacks. This thought has seldom been explored so devastatingly as in the living dead films directed by George Romero – *Night of the Living Dead* (1969), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985).

The *Dead* films are unusual among horror films for the explicitness of their political allegory and unique for having as their heroes 'positive' black men. In general, the latter have been applauded merely as an instance of affirmative action, casting colour blind a black man in a part which could equally well have gone to a white actor. As Robin Wood notes, however, 'it is not true that [their] colour is arbitrary and without meaning'; Ben's blackness in *Night* is used 'to signify his difference from the other characters, to set him apart from their norms'²⁴, while Peter's in *Dawn* again indicates 'his separation from the norms of white-dominated society and his partial exemption from its constraints'²⁵. In all three films, it is significant that the hero is a black man, and not just because this makes him 'different', but because it makes it possible to see that whites are the living dead. I shall confine detailed discussion here to the first film of the trilogy.

All the dead in *Night* are whites. In a number of places, the film shows that living whites are like, or can be mistaken for, the dead. The radio states that the zombies are 'ordinary looking people', and the first one we see in the film does look in the distance like some ordinary old white

²⁴ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986, p 116.

²⁵ *ibid*, p 120.



Whiteness and death equated in *Night of the Living Dead*.

guy wandering about the cemetery, somehow menacing, yet not obviously abnormal. John, the brother in the opening sequence, recalls pretending to be something scary to frighten Barb when they visited the graveyard as children; he imitates the famous zombie voice of Boris Karloff to scare her now. Halfway through the film, Barb becomes catatonic, like a dead person. The other developed white characters emerge from where they have been hiding, 'buried' in the cellar. Towards the end of the film, there is an aerial shot from the point of view of a helicopter involved in the destruction of the zombies; it looks down on a straggling line of people moving forward uncertainly but inexorably, in exactly the same formation as earlier shots of the zombies. It is only with a cut to a ground level shot that we realise this is a line of vigilantes, not zombies.

Living and dead whites are indistinguishable, and the zombies' sole *raison d'être*, to attack and eat the living, has resonances with the behaviour of the living whites. The vigilantes shoot and destroy the zombies with equanimity ('Beat 'em or burn 'em – they go up pretty good', says their leader, Chief McLelland), finally including the living – the hero, Ben (Duane Jones) – in their single-minded operations. Brother John torments Barb while living, and consumes her when he is dead. Helen and Harry Cooper bicker and snipe constantly, until their dead daughter Carrie first destroys, then eats them. The young couple, Tom and Judy, destined generically to settle down at the end of the film, instead go up in flames through Tom's stupidity and Judy's paralysed response to danger.

If whiteness and death are equated, both are further associated with the USA. That the film can be taken as a metaphor for the United States is established right at the start of the film. It opens on a car driving through apparently unpopulated back roads suggesting the road tradition of 1950s and '60s US culture – the novel *On the Road* (1957), the film *Easy Rider*

(1969) with its idea of the 'search for America'. When the car reaches the graveyard (the US?), a Stars and Stripes flag flutters in the foreground. The house in which the characters take shelter is archetypally middle, backwoods North American – a white wooden structure, with lace curtains, cut-glass ornaments, chintz armchairs. It, too, is immediately associated with death, in a series of shock cuts from Barb, exploring the house, to stuffed animal heads hung on the walls. Casting further heightens the all-Americanness of these zombie-like living whites. Barb is ultra-blonde and pale, and her name surely suggests the USA's best-selling doll; John is a preppy type, clean cut with straight fair hair, a white shirt with pens in the pocket, straight out of a Brooks Brothers advertisement. Judy too is dazzlingly blonde, though Tom and the Coopers are more nondescript whites.

What finally forces home the specifically white dimension of these zombie-US links are the ways in which the zombies can be destroyed. The first recalls the liberal critique of whites as ruled by their heads; as the radio announcer says, 'Kill the brain and you kill the ghoul' since, it seems, zombies/whites are nothing but their brains. The film diverges from earlier representations of the black/white, life/death opposition by representing Ben's 'life' quality in terms of practical skill, rather than innate qualities of 'being'. Particular striking is a scene in which Ben talks about what they need to do as he dismantles a table to make boards for the windows, while Barb takes the lace cloth from it, folds and cradles it, hanging on uselessly to this token of gentility while Ben tries to ensure their survival.

The alternative way of destroying the zombies is burning. Some of the imagery, particularly the molotov cocktails going up around empty cars, seems to recall, in its grainy black-and-white texture, newspaper coverage of the ghetto uprisings of the late '60s, and the 'fire', as an image of Black Power's threat to white people, had wide currency (most notably in the title of James Baldwin's 1963 *The Fire Next Time*). The zombies are scared of light as well as fire, and Ben is associated with both, not only because of his skill in warding off the zombies with torches, but in the way he is introduced into the film. Barb wanders out of the house into the glare of a car's headlights, out of which Ben seems to emerge; a shot of the lights glaring into the camera is followed by another with Ben moving into the frame, his white shirt first, then his black face filling the frame in front of the light, in a reversal of the good/bad, white/black, light/darkness antinomies of Western culture.

The film ends with the white vigilantes (indistinguishable from the zombies, remember) killing Ben, the representative of life in the film. Much of the imagery of *Night* carries over into *Dawn*, despite their many differences (most notably the latter's strong vein of humour). The opening sequence has white militia gleefully destroying living blacks and Hispanics who refuse to leave their tenement homes during the zombie emergency; as in *Night*, the black hero, Peter (Ken Foree), emerges from the light (this time from behind a white sheet with strong, bright light flooded unnaturalistically behind it); it is his practical skills that enable

him to survive, skills that only the white woman, Fran (Gaylen Ross), is ultimately able to emulate. Zombieness is still linked with whiteness, even though some of the dead are black or Hispanic – a black zombie who attacks a living black man in the tenement is whited up, the colour contrast between the two emphasised in a shot of the whitened black zombie biting the living black man's neck; in the shopping mall, an overt symbol of the US way of life, editing rhymes the zombies with the shop mannequins, all of whom are white.

Day extends the critique of US values to the military-industrial complex, with its underpinnings in masculine supremacy²⁶. As Robin Wood argues, the white men and the zombies alike are characterised by 'the conditioned reflex', the application to human affairs of relentless rationality; the scientist, Logan, teaches one of the zombies to be human again, which in practice means killing the military leader, Rhodes, out of atavistic loyalty to Logan. When Logan earlier tells Rhodes that what he is teaching the zombies is 'civility', to make them like the living, there is a sudden cut to a sequence of the men gleefully, sadistically corralling the zombies to be specimens for Logan's crazed experiments. The whiteness of all this is pointed, as before, by the presence of a black character, John (Terry Alexander), who is even more dissociated from both zombies and white male values than were Ben and Peter in the earlier films. He is not only black but West Indian, and he offers the idea of finding an island as the only hope for the two white characters (a WASP woman, Sarah, and an Irish man, Billy) not irrevocably implicated in white male values. He and Billy are not only socially marginal, but also live separately from the soldiers and scientists, having set up a mock home together in the outer reaches of the underground bunker they all share. All the other living characters are redneck males, and although there is a power struggle between them, they are both more like each other and like the zombies than they are like John, Sarah or Billy. At the end of one scene, where Rhodes has established his authority over Logan, there is a final shot of John, who has looked on saying nothing; he rubs the corner of his mouth with his finger ironically, then smiles sweetly at Rhodes, an expression of ineffably insolent refusal of the white boys' games.

The *Dead* films are of course horror movies and there is a danger, as Pete Boss has pointed out, that the kind of political readings that I and others have given them may not be easy 'to integrate . . . with the fantasies of physical degradation and vulnerability' characteristic of the contemporary horror film²⁷. However, the use of 'body horror' in the *Dead* films to represent whiteness is not simply symbolism, making use of what happens to the genre's current conventions. On the contrary, body horror is the horror of whiteness and the films' gory pleasures are like an inverted reprise of the images of whiteness that are touched on in *Simba* and *Jezebel*.

The point about Ben, Peter and John is that in their different ways they all have control over their bodies, are able to use them to survive, know how to do things with them. The white characters (with the excep-

²⁶ Robin Wood, 'The Woman's Nightmare: Masculinity in "The Day of the Dead"', *CineAction!*, no 6, August 1986, pp 45-49.

²⁷ Pete Boss, 'Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine', *Screen* January-February 1986, vol 27 no 1, p 18.

tion of Fran, Sarah and Billy) lose that control while alive, and come back in the monstrously uncontrolled form of zombieness. The hysterical boundedness of the white body is grotesquely²⁸ transgressed as whites/zombies gouge out living white arms, pull out organs, munch at orifices. The spectre of white loss of control is evoked by the way the zombies stumble and dribble in their inexorable quest for blood, often with intestines spilling out or severed limbs dangling. White over-investment in the brain is mercilessly undermined as brains spatter against the wall and zombies flop to the ground. 'The fear of one's own body, of how one controls it and relates to it'²⁹ and the fear of not being able to control other bodies, those bodies whose exploitation is so fundamental to capitalist economy, are both at the heart of whiteness. Never has this horror been more deliriously evoked than in these films of the *Dead*.

Because my aim has been to open up an area of investigation, I shall not even attempt a rounded conclusion. Instead, let me start off again on another tack, suggested by the passing references to light and colour above. I suspect that there is some very interesting work to be done on the invention of photography and the development of lighting codes in relation to the white face, which results in the technicist ideology that one sometimes hears of it being 'more difficult' to photograph black people. Be that as it may, it is the case that the codes of glamour lighting in Hollywood were developed in relation to white women, to endow them with a glow and radiance that has correspondences with the transcendental rhetoric of popular Christianity.

Of no woman star was this more true than Marilyn Monroe, known by the press at the time as 'the Body'. I've argued elsewhere that her image is an inescapably and necessarily white one³⁰; in many of her films this combines with the conventions of glamour lighting to make her disappear as flesh and blood even more thoroughly than is the case with other women stars. Her first appearance in *The Seven Year Itch* (1955), for instance, is a classic instance of woman as spectacle caught in a shot from the male protagonist's point of view. It opens on Richard (Tom Ewell), on his hands and knees on the floor looking for something, bottom sticking up, a milk bottle between his legs – the male body shown, as is routine in sex comedies, as ludicrously grotesque; he hears the door-bell and opens the door to his flat; as the door opens light floods in on him; he looks and there is a cut to the hall doorway, where the curvy shape of a woman is visible through the frosted glass. The woman's shape is placed exactly within the frame of the door window, the doorway is at the end of the hall, exactly in the centre of the frame; a set of enclosing rectangles create a strong sense of perspective, and emphasise the direction of Richard's/our gaze. The colouring of the screen is pinky-white and light emanates from behind the doorway where the

²⁸ cf the discussion of the grotesque carnivalesque body in Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1984.

²⁹ Philip Brophy, 'Horrority – the Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films', *Screen* January-February 1986, vol 27 no 1, p 8.

³⁰ Richard Dyer, *Heavenly Bodies*, London, Macmillan, 1986, pp 42-45.

woman is. All we see of her is her silhouette, defining her proportions, but she also looks translucent. The film cuts back to Richard, his jaw open in awe, bathed in stellar light. Later in the film, when the Monroe character's tomato plant crashes onto Richard's patio, we have another shot of her from Richard's point of view. He looks up, and there is a cut to Monroe looking down from her balcony, apparently nude; the wall behind her is dark, as is the vegetation on the balcony, so her face and shoulders stand out as white. Such moments conflate unreal angel-glow with sexual aura.

The Seven Year Itch is a very smart film. Through innumerable gags and cross-references, it lets on that it knows about male fantasy and its remote relation to reality. Yet it is also part of the Monroe industry, peddling an impossible dream, offering another specifically white ideal as if it embodies all heterosexual male yearning, offering another white image that dissolves in the light of its denial of its own specificity.

White women are constructed as the apotheosis of desirability, all that a man could want, yet nothing that can be had, nor anything that a woman can be. But, as I have argued, white representation *in general* has this everything-and-nothing quality.

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BLACK SPECTATORSHIP: PROBLEMS OF IDENTIFICATION AND RESISTANCE

BY MANTHIA DIAWARA

WHENEVER BLACKS ARE represented in Hollywood, and sometimes when Hollywood omits blacks from its films altogether, there are spectators who denounce the result and refuse to suspend their disbelief. The manner in which black spectators may circumvent identification and resist the persuasive elements of Hollywood narrative and spectacle informs both a challenge to certain theories of spectatorship and the aesthetics of Afro-American independent cinema. In this article I posit the interchangeability of the terms 'black spectator' and 'resisting spectator' as a heuristic device to imply that just as some blacks identify with Hollywood's images of blacks, some white spectators, too, resist the racial representations of dominant cinema. Furthermore, by exploring the notion of the resisting spectator my aim is to reassess some of the claims of certain theories of spectatorship which have not so far accounted for the experiences of black spectators.

Since the mid-'70s much has been written on the subject of spectatorship. Early landmarks in the debate, such as articles like Christian Metz' on the Imaginary Signifier¹, Laura Mulvey's on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema² and Stephen Heath's on Difference³ with their recourse to Freud and Lacan, tended to concentrate the argument around gendered spectatorship. More recently, debates have begun to focus on issues of sexuality as well as gender, yet with one or two exceptions⁴, the prevailing approach has remained colour-blind. The position of the spectator in the cinematic apparatus has been described by recourse to the psychoanalytic account of the mirror phase, suggesting that the metapsychology of identification (with the camera or point of enunciation) entails a narcissistic form of regression which leads to a state similar to the infant's illusion of a unified ego. But since spectators are socially and historically as well as psychically constituted, it is not clear whether the experiences of black spectators are included in this analysis. Indeed, there are instances of film consumption which reveal the inadequacies of this approach and which implicitly question certain

¹ Christian Metz, 'The Imaginary Signifier', *Screen* Summer 1975, vol 16 no 2, pp 14-76.

² Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

³ Stephen Heath, 'Difference', *Screen* Autumn 1978, vol 19 no 3, pp 51-112.

⁴ Homi K Bhabha, 'The Other Question', *Screen* November-December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 18-36.

aspects of the prevailing problematic around spectatorship. To examine these instances, from the specific perspective of my own position as a black male spectator, I want to suggest that the components of 'difference' among elements of race, gender and sexuality give rise to different readings of the same material. Specifically, as an African film scholar based in the North American context, I am interested in the way that Afro-American spectators may, at times, constitute a particular case of what I call resisting spectatorship. From the specificity and limitations of my own position as a black male spectator the aim is to consider what insights this particular formation of spectatorship can bring to the analysis of Hollywood films.

To illustrate my argument I have chosen to begin with a sequence from *The Birth of a Nation* (directed by D W Griffiths, 1915) to demonstrate how aspects of a dominant film can be read differently once the alternative readings of Afro-American spectators are taken into account, as the black spectator's reluctance to identify with the dominant reading of this archetypical Hollywood text also underpins the protest elicited by a film as recent as *The Color Purple* (directed by Steven Spielberg, 1986). The five minute sequence from *The Birth of a Nation* involves the pursuit of a young white girl by a black man, often referred to as the 'Gus chase' sequence. It takes place in the second part of the film, set in the period of Reconstruction in the South. Prior to this sequence, Senator Stoneman, one of the leading Northern white liberals, sends Silas Lynch, his mulatto protégé, to run for the seat of Lieutenant Governor in a Southern state. Silas conspires with 'carpetbaggers' to deny whites the right to vote and wins the election by means of the new black vote. Soon, the new leaders of the South lift the ban on inter-racial marriages and the whites, in response, form the Ku Klux Klan to protect themselves from what they call 'the new tyrants'.

The 'Gus chase' sequence begins with 'Little Sister', from the planocratic Confederate Cameron family, going to a secluded stream in the woods and ends with her death in her brother's arms. The sequence contains about 105 shots in six narrational units: 1) Little Sister on her way to the stream/ Gus, the black man, following her unseen. 2) Little Sister playing with a squirrel/ Gus watching her unseen. 3) Gus confronting Little Sister and proposing to her/ Little Colonel looking for Little Sister. 4) Gus chasing Little Sister/ Little Colonel coming towards the stream to look for his sister. 5) Gus pursuing Little Sister to the top of the cliff where she jumps off/ Little Colonel approaching the scene. 6) Gus, seeing Little Colonel, fleeing/ Little Colonel taking his dying sister in his arms. The sequence is situated between two intertitles, one stating that Little Sister went into the woods despite her brother's warning, and the other that the gates of heaven will welcome her. Each alternated section is made up of several shots, some of which are repeated within the sequence. The rhythm of the editing is faster when Gus chases Little Sister and slower when Little Colonel takes her in his arms. Bright lights are cast on Little Sister and her brother while Gus is cast in dark shadows. Where Little Colonel wears a suit befitting his title and his

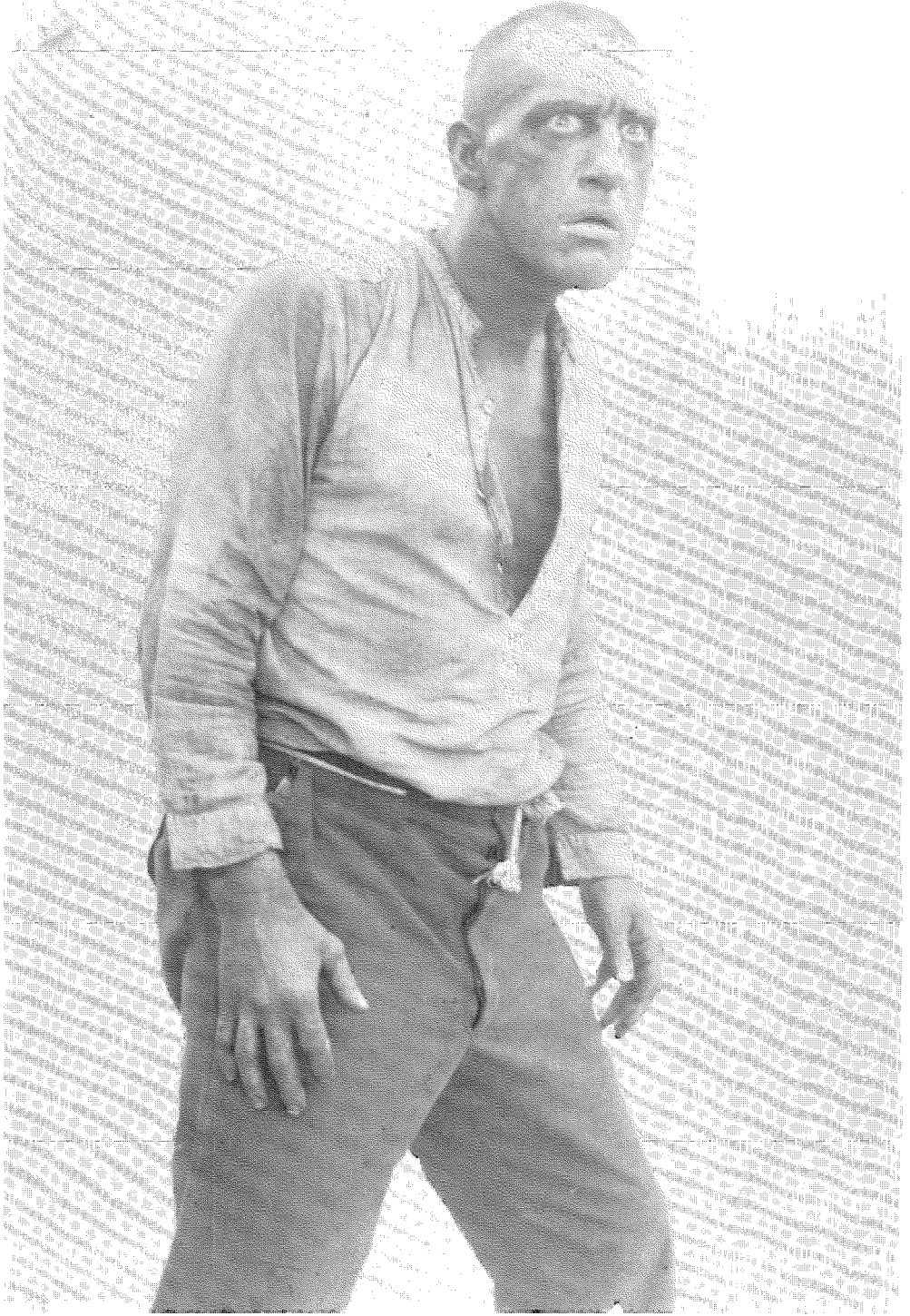
sister wears a modest dress, Gus does not wear his captain's uniform and his broken English confirms his 'inferiority' and otherness.

The dominant reading of this sequence supports a Manichean world view of race in which Gus represents absolute evil and Little Colonel and his sister embody absolute good. Editing, *mise-en-scène*, narrative content all combine to compel the spectator to regard Gus as the representation of danger and chaos: he is the alien, that which does not resemble oneself, that from which one needs protection. Whether black or white, male or female, the spectator is supposed to identify with the Camerons and encouraged to hate Gus. Similarly, the popular Tarzan movies position all spectators, white and black, to identify with the white hero; likewise, the Blaxploitation genre is intelligible to white spectators only if they suspend their critical judgement and identify with the black heroes like Shaft in the film of that name (1971). What is at issue in this fragment from *The Birth of a Nation* is the contradiction between the rhetorical force of the story – the dominant reading compels the black spectator to identify with the racist inscription of the black character – and the resistance, on the part of Afro-American spectators, to this version of US history, on account of its Manichean dualism.

In discussing the structure of myths, A J Greimas argues that at the basis of every story is a confrontation between *desire* and *law*.⁵ The Oedipus myth provides a point of reference for certain theories of spectatorship which argue that each story fascinates the spectator to the extent that it retells the primordial Oedipus narrative, with its confrontation of desire and patriarchal order. But does this account for the positioning of the black spectator of *The Birth of a Nation*? At the beginning of the story Gus enters the scene as the wrong-doer, and his punishment starts with the arrival of Little Colonel as part of a process to restore order and harmony in the South. Such an endeavour entails the resolution of the narrative fragment through Gus' punishment. The narrative thus proposes Little Colonel as the representative of the symbolic *white/Father* who will restore the law of patriarchal order by castrating the rebellious black, Gus. It is Little Colonel who persuades the other whites to form a Klan to terrorise and discipline the blacks who threaten to destroy the social and symbolic order of the South. Thus Gus's desire for Little Sister is a transgression: the narrative of miscegenation links isomorphically with the Oedipal narrative of incestuous desire, an assault on the symbolic order of the Father which merits the most serious punishment – lynching. At the level of spectator identification, the narrative function summarised by the narrational sequence – 'death of Little Sister' – is organised to position the spectator as the subject who desires to see, in the words of the intertitle, the 'punishment and discipline of Gus and the black race he symbolises'.

The resisting spectator, however, refutes the representation of Little Colonel as an authoritative father figure and the narrative proposition that lynching is a means of restoring the racial and symbolic order of the South. By the time the film was made, the Civil War was understood by most Afro-Americans as a revolutionary war which emancipated the

⁵ A J Greimas,
Sémantique Structurale,
Paris, Larousse, 1966,
p 213.



Gus as the embodiment of evil, inferiority and Otherness (played by a blacked-up white actor).

The Birth of a Nation:
Little Sister with the
false heroes of the
Civil War, the Ku
Klux Klan.



slaves and united the nation. The father figures and heroes of the story should, therefore, have come from the side of the victors, not that of the Klan which symbolised resistance to the ideals of democracy. *The Birth of a Nation* appears to misread history for ideological reasons. Not only is Little Colonel a fake father and hero, but the black experience is rendered absent in the text. The argument that blacks in the South were docile and happy with their condition as slaves and that black Northerners were only rebellious mulattos aspiring to be white is totally unconvincing once it is compared to historical accounts of the black American experience.⁶

It would be worthwhile to note how spectatorial resistance to the racist ideology encoded in *The Birth of a Nation* is expressed, often in 'realist' terms, by invoking an alternative account based on Afro-American historical experience. This response has been recently echoed in certain reactions to *The Color Purple*. Pointing to the many racial stereotypes that it features, Rita Dandridge argues that, 'Spielberg's credentials for producing *The Color Purple* are minimal. He is not a Southerner. He has no background in the black experience, and he seems to know little about feminism'.⁷ Bearing this point in mind I want to consider the image of the punished and disciplined black man in contemporary films such as *Rocky II* (1979), *A Soldier's Story* (1984) and *Forty-Eight Hours* (1982) as well as *The Color Purple* itself.

It seems to me that the re-inscription of the image of the 'castrated' black male in these contemporary Hollywood films can be illuminated by a perspective similar to that advanced by feminist criticism. Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator. However, as a black male spectator, I wish to argue, in addition, that the dominant cinema situates black characters

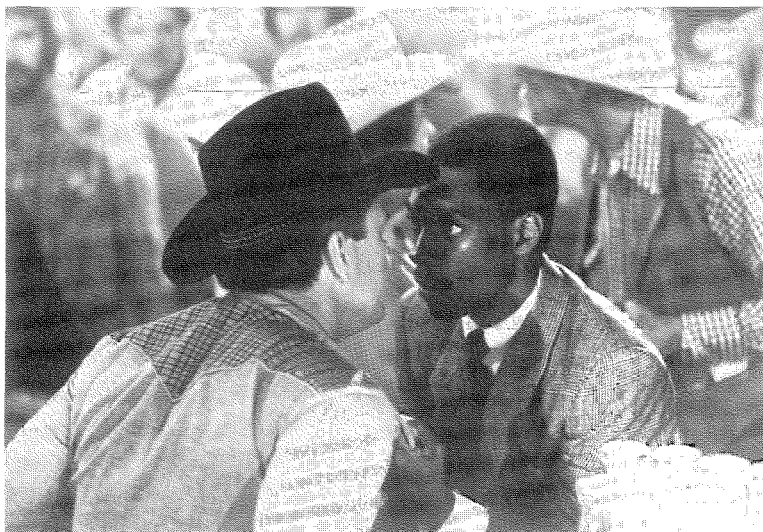
⁶ Reactions to *Birth of a Nation* and its place in Hollywood's history of racial representation are discussed in Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattos and Bucks*, New York, Bantam, 1974; Daniel Leab, *From Sambo to Superspade*, New York, Houghton Mifflin, 1976; Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.

⁷ Rita Dandridge, 'The Little Book (and Film) that Started the Big War', *Black Film Review* vol 2 no 2, 1986, p 28.

primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female). To illustrate this point, one may note how black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to whites either by white domestication of black customs and culture – a process of deracination and isolation – or by stories in which blacks are depicted playing by the rules of white society and losing.

In considering recent mainstream films, Eddie Murphy presents an interesting case for the analysis of the problematic 'identification' between the black (male) spectator and the image of the black (male) character. Throughout the films in which Murphy has starred – *Trading Places* (1983), *Forty-Eight Hours*, and *Beverly Hills Cop I and II* (1984 and 1987) – his persona is that of the street-wise Afro-American dude, which might appear somewhat threatening. Yet in each narrative Murphy's character is deterritorialised from a black milieu and transferred to a predominantly white world. As the *Beverly Hills Cop* he leaves Detroit for an assignment in Los Angeles, and in *Forty-Eight Hours* he leaves the prison (scene of punishment) to team up with the white policeman played by Nick Nolte. In this story, Murphy's character, Reggie Hammond, is a convict enlisted by the police to help track down two fellow prisoners who have escaped. Murphy's persona invokes the image of the criminalised black male, and yet he is called upon to protect and enforce the law, given a gun, a police-badge and handcuffs, all of which symbolise the same order that has punished and disciplined him. The two male protagonists are presented as antagonistic, but in the eyes of the black/resisting spectator it is clear that he is only there to complement the white character as an authority figure. Nolte's character, Jack Cates, is tough, persevering and just, whereas Murphy's is exhibitionistic, inconsistent (swaying between good and evil) and inauthentic (he is to Nolte's character what Gus is to Little Colonel): Reggie Hammond transgresses the boundaries of the law established by Jack Cates as the representative of white authority. In one scene, which takes place in a 'red neck' bar, Hammond asks Cates, the white policeman, to give him his gun and the badge temporarily, so that he can use them to obtain information from people in the bar. But Hammond cannot even get their attention until he starts an exhibition, shouting and screaming and throwing a glass which breaks on a mirror. It is interesting to compare this exhibitionist act to an earlier shot of a partially-naked (white) female 'go-go' dancer, the image of which frames the beginning and ending of this bar-room sequence. Hammond takes the place of the woman as he becomes the object of the look of the men in the bar – and figure of the white spectator's fascination. In the fight between the two protagonists played by Nolte and Murphy, which takes place after the bar scene, Cates cannot get the desired information from Hammond, but on the other hand the fight is also motivated by the way that Hollywood requires that the black character must be punished after he has behaved like a hero (albeit a comic one) and humiliated the white people in the bar. *Forty-Eight Hours* mixes genres (the police story and the comedy, the serious and the fake authority figures) and achieves a 'balance' whereby

Forty-Eight Hours:
Eddy Murphy, as
Hammond, getting
the facts in the 'red
neck' bar.



the black character is only good at subverting order, while the white character restores narrative order – in the end Hammond returns to jail. For the Afro-American audience, however, this racial tension and balance pre-empts any sense of direct 'identification' with Murphy's character because ultimately his 'transgressions' are subject to the same process of discipline and punishment – he is not the hero of the story, although he may be the star of the show. Black protagonists, such as Apollo Creed in *Rocky II*, receive a similar narrative treatment in which their defeat is necessary to establish the white male character, Rocky, as the hero. In both cases, the Afro-American spectator is denied the possibility of identification with black characters as credible or plausible personalities. Thus, it cannot be assumed that black (male or female) spectators share in the 'pleasures' which such films are able to offer to white audiences.

Alongside the textual deracination or isolation of blacks, the narrative pattern of blacks playing by hegemonic rules and *losing* also denies the pleasure afforded by spectatorial identification. In terms of the Oedipal analogy in the structure of such narrative patterns, the black male subject always appears to lose in the competition for the symbolic position of the father or authority figure. And at the level of spectatorship, the black spectator, regardless of gender or sexuality, fails to enjoy the pleasures which are at least available to the white male heterosexual spectator positioned as the subject of the films' discourse. Moreover, the pleasures of narrative resolution – the final tying-up of loose ends in the hermeneutic code of detection – is also an ambiguous experience for black spectators. In *A Soldier's Story*, for example, Captain Davenport (Howard E Rollins), a black lawyer from Washington, comes to an army base in a small Southern town to investigate the murder of a black sergeant. The dead sergeant had been hated by the enlisted blacks because he blamed them for the problems caused by racism in the army.



Villainy transferred to the blacks: the unpopular sergeant (right) accuses CJ Memphis in *A Soldier's Story*.

He was opposed to any expression of black culture by the soldiers and is revealed at the end of the story of have been responsible for the death of Private CJ, who sang the blues, told folktales and played sports, thus asserting elements of black culture. The black soldiers resented the conflation of standard army behaviour with white culture and accused the sergeant of wanting to pass for white. Captain Davenport also represses his racial identity and idealises the US army, yet while the sergeant displays his weakness through tears, uncontrollable laughter and alcoholism, the captain is cold, austere and businesslike. He rejects the probable but easy solution that the murder of the black soldier was committed by the Klan, and embarks instead on a search for 'the truth'. The complex psychology of the two characters is not explored; the film simply idealises the army as a homogenous and just institution and ends with the arrest and punishment of a *black* suspect, Pete (Denzel Washington). This surprise twist at the end of the narrative, which sacrifices one more black man in order to show that justice exists, fails to satisfy the expectation, on the part of the black spectator, to find the Klan or a white soldier responsible for the crime. The plot of *Soldier's Story*, with its predominantly black cast, suggests a liberal reading of race in the American South; but by implicitly transferring villainy from the Klan to the blacks, it denies the pleasure of resolution to the Afro-American spectator.

If we return to the sequence from *The Birth of a Nation* it is possible to see the interaction of race and gender in two narrative situations which position the black spectator in a similarly problematic relation to the film's ideological standpoint. The first is voyeuristic: Gus watches Little Sister as she innocently plays with a squirrel. Knowing that Gus has been following her, the spectator begins to fear for her safety. As the

The vengeance-inciting shot of Little Colonel with his dead sister.



opening intertitle states, her brother warned her about the danger of being alone in the woods. Being watched unawares here connotes not the lures of voyeurism and exhibitionism, but danger, and equates Gus, intertextually, with the unseen danger that stalks the innocent in many thrillers and horror movies. The other situation concerns the chase itself. As Gus begins pursuing Little Sister, the parallel montage accelerates, encouraging the spectator to identify with the helpless condition of Little Sister. Only when Little Colonel appears does the spectator feel a moment of release, as she or he is repositioned to identify with the rescue of Little Sister. The long take of Little Colonel slowly raising his sister in his arms, and its subsequent repetition, is organised to make the spectator feel grief and desire vengeance against Gus. As I have argued, the black spectator is placed in an impossible position – drawn by the narrative to identify with the white woman, yet resisting the racist reading of the black man as a dangerous threat. It seems to me that a parallel dilemma is created in some scenes from *The Color Purple*, especially where Mister (Danny Glover) chases Nettie (Akosua Busia) on her way to school. This chase scenario is similar to that of the ‘Gus chase’ sequence in many respects.

Both take place in the woods, outside ‘civilisation’ and, in each case, a tall, menacing black man chases an innocent girl with the intention of raping her. In each the girl epitomises innocence while the black male connotes evil. The girls’ activities – Little Sister playing with a squirrel, Nettie on her way to school to get a much needed education – encourage the sympathy of the spectator, while Gus and Mister symbolise a danger and brutality that solicits only antipathy on the part of the viewer. In *The Birth of a Nation*, evil and lust are attributed to the black man and the black woman alike, but in *The Color Purple* they are attributed to the

black male alone. Close-ups of Gus' nose and eyes appear to make him deformed and telephoto lenses are used in *The Color Purple* to exaggerate Mister's features, as if to emphasise his inhumanity or bestial nature. Both films use parallel montage and fast rhythm to encourage the spectator to identify with the victims of the danger represented by Gus/Mister, and to desire lynching for Gus and punishment by death for Mister.

The pairing of these two 'chase' sequences suggests another reading of the rhetoric of punishment. When Nettie hits Mister in the genitals her action can be seen as castrating, signifying the removal of the penis from an undeserving man; but in terms of narrative structure this can be read as a replay of the Gus chase sequence. The Manichean figuration of Mister as evil (with its implicit judgement of black males in general) is the main reason why some spectators – and black men in particular – have resisted the dominant reading of *The Color Purple*. Its simplistic portrayal of the black man as quintessentially evil prevents the film from dealing adequately with such complex issues as black female and black male relationships, white racism, sex and religion that Alice Walker's original text addressed.

The treatment of the two shaving scenes also illustrates the film's denigration of the black male. Here Celie replaces Little Colonel as the punishing agent or the father figure, just as Nettie does in the scene of the chase. Must the spectator adopt the dominant reading of these scenes, and be implicated thereby in the vengeance of black women against black men, or should this reading be resisted because it attempts to ally black women with the symbolic white father in the castration of black men? While the former reading is obvious in the first shaving scene, the latter reading is made possible through the montage of the second scene and the ideological positions of race and gender which it narrativises. Because the first scene is preceded by a heart-rending separation of the sisters imposed by Mister's cruelty, Celie's wish to kill him may be seen as a justified end to black male tyranny and the liberation of the black woman. But in repeating the same scene (note that *The Birth of a Nation* also repeats the vengeance-denoting shot of Little Colonel holding his sister), its message is unmistakable. The black man's place of origin, Africa, it is implied, is the source of his essential evil and cruelty. By intercutting violent shots of ritualistic scarring and other initiation ceremonies with shots of Celie and Mister, the film might be read as suggesting that sexism is fundamental to black male and female relationships and that its locus is Africa. For the resisting spectator, the problem with this interpretation is that such juxtapositions might equally be read by a white male spectator as not only exonerating 'the white man' from sexism, but more importantly, calling for the punishment of the black man as the inevitable resolution to the conflict.

Throughout this article I have argued for an analysis of resistant spectatorship, but the question of how some black spectators identify with the representation of blacks in dominant cinema – through an act of disavowal? – remains to be explored. On a more positive note, however, resisting spectators are transforming the problem of passive identification

Sisters Nettie and Celie rent apart by Mister in *The Color Purple*.



into active criticism which both informs and interrelates with contemporary oppositional film-making. The development of black independent productions has sharpened the Afro-American spectator's critical attitude towards Hollywood films. Black directors such as Charles Burnett, Billie Woodberry and Warington Hudlin practice a 'cinema of the real' in which there is no manipulation of the look to bring the spectator to a passive state of uncritical identification. The films show a world which does not position the spectator for cathartic purposes, but one which constructs a critical position for him or her in relation to the 'real' and its representation. Other directors such as Larry Clarke, Julie Dash, Haile Gerima and Alile Sharon Larkin use a mixed form of fiction and documentary in which the documentary element serves to deconstruct the illusion created by the fiction and makes the spectator question the representation of 'reality' through the different modes. Clyde Taylor describes Clarke's *Passing Through* (1977) as an attempt to 'subvert the Hollywood action genre, riffing its search, confrontation, chase and vengeance formulas with unruly notes from the underground'.⁸ Women film-makers like Larkin and Dash practice the mixed form, to counter dominant sexist and racist perceptions of black women.

As more audiences discover such independent black films, spectatorial resistance to Hollywood's figuration of blacks will become increasingly focused and sharpened. In the influential 'Third Cinema' film, *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), Frantz Fanon is quoted as saying that 'every spectator is a coward or traitor', a comment which resonates in independent film practices that question the passive role of the spectator in the dominant film culture. One of the roles of black independent cinema, therefore, must be to increase spectator awareness of the impossibility of an uncritical acceptance of Hollywood products.

An earlier version of this article appeared in *CinémAction*, no 46, 1988.

⁸ Clyde Taylor, 'The L A Rebellion: New Spirit in American Film', *Black Film Review* vol 2 no 2, 1986, p 11.

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FANTASIES OF OPPOSITIONALITY: REFLECTIONS ON RECENT CONFERENCES IN BOSTON AND NEW YORK

BY COCO FUSCO

TO FOCUS ON THE MOMENT is to risk a degree of historical blindness. I will therefore begin by admitting to certain assumptions about the conditions of the present with regard to race and representation. First, the question of race figures differently, and to a much higher degree in current cultural politics, particularly in media and visual arts, than it did at the beginning of this decade. This phenomenon is directly related to the film and advertising industries, where there has been an increased interest in 'ethnic' audiences, due in part to the success of black and Latino films in the marketplace. The market power of ethnic groups is not only linked to the rise of ethnic middle classes, but to the rate of growth of black and Latino populations in the US since the Second World War and shifts in immigration patterns that have added hundreds of thousands of people of colour to the USA. The impact of these changes upon the US is shown in the extent to which they are transforming a sense of national and cultural identity. In the case of New York City, for example, we are living in a moment in which the majority population is non-white, though the distribution of wealth is disproportionately concentrated among whites, as is the distribution of public funds for cultural activities. New York has become a Third World city.

Among the political and sociological considerations that these changes have raised are tremendous anxieties about the feasibility of strategies of social engineering. For every 'ethnic success story' trumpeted by the media there are countless instances of racial violence, prejudicial deployment of immigration laws, depressing unemployment and literacy statistics and pervasive institutionalised racism. Together, these factors contribute to the shift in definition of group interests from class and nation to identity categorisations based on sexuality, ethnicity, and lifestyle. It is not only the agenda of cultural politics that is changing, but our very concepts of culture and politics themselves.

For more than two decades, the Black Arts and other ethnically based

artistic movements have produced cultural events which have received varying degrees of attention from the 'outside' world. There have been moments marked by 'crossovers' of all sorts, from commercial success in the market to critical acclaim in the (white) art world, from official attempts at cultural integration to sub-cultural acts of appropriation. My particular concern in the context of the present is how the current 'multicultural' interests interface with 'separatist' projects. The sheer number of high profile cultural events in New York recently suggest that we are in the middle of a crisis of *multiculturalism*: these range from the Bronx Museum's *Latin American Spirit 1920-1970* exhibition sponsored by Philip Morris and several state and federal agencies; to the Rockefeller Foundation's reactivation of 'intercultural' grants (and plans to develop world-wide distribution of film and video art with seventy per cent producers being people of colour and/or from the Third World); to the Society for Photographic Education's conference on *The Other/Voices: Issues in Representation*; to the New Museum's panels (and book project) on the *Ideology of the Margin* and the Dia Art Foundation's lecture series, soliciting 'subaltern' scholars: in addition, there are forthcoming multicultural arts projects which include the *Decade* show collaboration between the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art and the New Museum. Rather than attempt to address this trend in general terms, I prefer to focus on the role of the avant-garde sector in this conjuncture and examine its current interest in the so-called 'other'. Underlying the resurgent interest in otherness in the avant-garde is both the legacy of its role as a broker between the mainstream and non-western and 'vernacular' cultures, and its identification with the 'marginality' it claims to share with disempowered groups. The avant-garde's current turn to the 'other' ambivalently affirms and questions its own marginality.

In the context of the alternative media sector that constitutes the contemporary avant-garde in the US, the current focus on the 'other' comes at the end of a period in which deconstruction, psychoanalysis and feminism have maintained hegemony, to a greater or lesser extent, over intellectual culture. The shift in attention, and the debates over the implications of these theories, suggest that certain operative categories can no longer hold as much weight as they have in cultural politics. Even the avant-garde is subject to market interests and pressures and is compelled to seek out new material for interpretation and exhibition. The avant-garde and 'socially conscious' institutional engagement in 'discovery' of the 'other' is also, however, an engagement in collective amnesia of past entanglements and, in more recent memory, of dismissive rejection. Although the promotional mechanisms would have it otherwise, there is nothing new about the so-called 'other' or its discovery. Western cultural institutions such as the avant-garde have a history of rejuvenating themselves through the exploitation of disempowered peoples and cultures.

Independent, alternative and/or experimental film and video exhibition is dependent on public funds (even more so, perhaps than in the

visual arts), and political arguments about accountability and proportionate representation are especially powerful in this area of cultural production. It is crucial, therefore, to recognise that the blossoming of multicultural media events in a place such as New York is due in part to institutional pressures expressed as arguments about the need for 'out-reach', and the perceived need to redress the effective ethnic segregation of the art world. What is not always addressed in the policy discourse of multiculturalism is the segregated division of labour in which, more often than not, white arts institutions provide structures of control in which white intellectuals theorise about racism while ethnic film and video producers supply 'experiential' materials in the form of testimony and documentary, or in which the white intelligentsia solicits token Third World intellectuals to theorise about the question – that is, the problem of the 'other' – for the white intelligentsia. These divisions contribute to the continuation of cultural apartheid regardless of the multicultural veneer. Given these problems, it should come as no surprise that fears exist, within Third World organisations, that the current multicultural impetus will ultimately hurt, not help them. Tokenism, and lack of cooperation with Third World organisations, coupled with a rise in interest among white artists and intellectuals, signal, for many, the beginning of attrition in economic support for black, Latino and Asian intermediaries. It will always be easier and more expedient for funders to participate in the consolidation or takeover of discrete entities than to support a number of small units.

I do not wish, nonetheless, to reduce the current surge in interest to an effect of market mechanisms and institutional anxieties, for this would be to neglect the existence and continuing emergence of challenging work by artists of colour, and to overlook the extraordinary influence that postcolonial studies, the 'new ethnography', and black literary theory have had within the North American academy. The development of critical discourse on the postmodern condition and on counterhegemonic visual strategies of Third Cinema calls for further exploration of parallels in the logic and mechanisms of appropriation and syncretism between the western avant-garde and its 'others'.

Much has already been said about postmodernism as a symptom of a crisis of identity in and of the First World. Yet we are only beginning to understand the points of intersection between these theories and the currents emerging from 'other' sectors critical of theory. These include the reconceptualisation of the 'Third World' as an effect of (post)modernity; the production and perpetuation of colonial fantasies, such as Orientalism, and within such colonial discourses, the situation of the subaltern and the postcolonial subject. These currents in theory also include the critical revaluation of essentialist definitions of ethnicity, a rethinking of racial identity not as a fixed but historicised, political category, and the study of dialectical patterns of assimilation and resistance in New World diasporic cultural phenomena as postmodernist gestures *avant la lettre*. Henry Louis Gates Jr's notion of black American vernacular culture's polyvalent 'signifyin'; Gerardo Mos-

quera's characterisation of Cuban and Caribbean cultural experience as an ongoing encounter with different stages of social development¹; Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria's vision of the modern Latin American literary project as the dismantling of ideologically fixed notions of identity and concepts of culture²; Paul Gilroy's analysis of contemporary black popular music as an amalgam of Afro-centric traditions and modern technological sensibilities and apparatuses³ – all are examples of cultural studies that have helped to further the understanding of Third World peoples' relations to modernity, the production of images, and the question of self-identity. Varied as these studies are, they signal a move away from celebration of ethnicity and presumption of ahistorical identity in critical discourses on Third World culture.

Unfortunately, the current state of affairs in public programming in the independent film and video sector barely allows for inquiry at this level of analysis. This is due in part to the nature of the models employed in public criticism and in the events in which critical dialogue takes place. The conservative demands of funding bodies and of the market obviously play a role, but these constraints are not entirely determinant. Problematic gestures come not only from the largely white avant-garde sector, but also from cultural nationalist tendencies in the Third World independent media sector. To illustrate some of the difficulties in furthering critical discourse on race and representation in this context, I want to focus in particular on two recent film conference/exhibition programmes. Rather than 'reporting' these events as such, I consider how the issues were presented, how the framing of the issues precluded address to certain crucial questions, and what power relations are involved in the two models.

I should at this point acknowledge my own inability to engage in disinterested observation. As a woman of colour, and a participant in this sector as critic, curator/programmer, and programme officer for a government-funded granting agency, it would be impossible for me to present an unbiased point of view. Within my own relatively short lifespan, I have lived through the development of fictional categories to define my own ethnicity (Hispanic, a term for which there exists no concrete, nor geographical referent) – I can also remember when the same individuals and institutions that are now engaged in multicultural initiatives excluded questions of race and marshalled arguments about quality and complexity to maintain cultural apartheid. As a mixed race individual of Afro-Caribbean descent I can attest to the conceptual and material difficulties of separatism; and I have become extremely aware of how meagre access to the means of production is conducive to competitive antagonism between Third World groups, and how these antagonisms facilitate the continuing hegemony of dominant institutions. But it is for such reasons that it is important to examine the difficulties in these two recent events.

The two conferences are the 'Celebration of Black Cinema' (CBC) held in Boston and the 'Sexism, Colonialism, Misrepresentation: A Cor-

¹ Gerardo Mosquera, *Exploraciones en la Plástica Cubana*, Havana, Cuba, Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1983.

² Roberto Gonzalez Echevarria, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern Latin American Literature*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1985.

³ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*, London, Century Hutchinson, 1987.

⁴ Mbye B Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins, Introduction in Mbye B Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988, p 9.

rective Film Series' held in New York, both in April of 1988. The Boston event, presided over by Claire Andrade-Watkins (associate professor at Emerson College), and programmed by Pearl Bowsver and ICA film curator Julie Levinson, showcased black independent films from Anglophone Africa, Britain and the US. It was run by a majority black (all but one), majority female (five out of seven) committee with public funds. It included two panel discussions with prominent black film scholars, one with visiting film-makers, and a film programme of eighteen titles. In addition, CBC, Inc issued *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, a book intended to offer 'a rare global and systematic examination of the particularities as well as the commonalities of the history, the context, and the aesthetics of black independent film practice in "Anglophone" Africa, the United States and Britain.'⁴

Though it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into extensive contextual detail, the Boston event cannot be fully understood without noting its place in the cultural environment of the East Coast art world. Since its inception in 1981, CBC has served as an important venue for black independent media, operating in an area of Third World film and video exhibition/distribution, which has historically been one of the weakest, most problematic and underfunded. The development of non-commercial channels of exhibition, buttressed by critical discourse and educationally oriented research – all of which are served by CBC – has been crucial to the survival of the black independent media sector.

The three historical essays in *BlackFrames* lay a groundwork for understanding the presence or absence, nature, context and conditions of cinematic production in each area. The style each essayist takes is as indicative as the information, demonstrating a much needed methodological flexibility to account for film production in the different regions of the diaspora. James Snead's survey, 'Images of Blacks in Black Independent Films', reflects on the relativity of the term 'independent', and relates the development of black American independent film to the influences of structures in dominance such as segregationist legislation, Hollywood stylistic codes, racist stereotypes. His account also emphasises technology – the potentials and disadvantages afforded by the postwar advent of 16mm equipment – and the political imperatives around representation that gained currency with the Civil Rights movement. Manthia Diawara's study, 'Film in Anglophone Africa', takes account of the dearth of films produced in Anglophone Africa by foregrounding the economic impediments resulting from neocolonialist inequities, and the relative lack of local government investment. Jim Pines' essay, 'The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema', demystifies the apparent black British 'boom' in independent productions in the 1980s, by recounting its antecedents, and the institutional shifts that have made current experiments possible. The historical perspective in each of these essays gives a sense of how racial inequities play into black film development, thus eluding the presumption that racial identity is determinant in that development and recognising the variety of styles, genres and thematic concerns in and between each region.

Economic and political questions of independence in relation to cultural practice are also implicated in CBC as an organisational form. CBC is an exercise in cultural autonomy, an indication of the possibility of international cooperation between black organisations and, as such, a transformation of diaspora as dispersal into diaspora as trans-national unity. And it is precisely within these structures that the specificity of black cultural experiences and practices can be examined, questioned and understood. But CBC is not a disinterested learning experience, it is also a business, with 'Inc' proudly displayed throughout its literature. It is consolidated through the legislation of exclusivity of rights, such as establishing exclusive rights to British Council support for the year 1988.

For all its positive contributions to the black independent media sector, CBC was also fraught with contradictions and conflicts which are symptomatic of the problematic status of critical discourse within this sector, especially when monolithic notions of black identity mask internal differences and occlude crucial agendas. Most evident was the all too familiar tension between the impetus to claim all-inclusiveness or to disclaim it out of either unavoidable constraints or critical prerogative. This is not peculiar to black cultural events, but the tension underlies a chronic, unresolved debate in black cultural politics over the role of the producer in relation to the supposed 'community' and the role of the critical intermediary in relation to the film practitioners' 'community'. In the case of CBC, the book's editors claimed to provide an inclusive purview, while the film programmers opted for selectivity, and many filmmakers felt justified in admonishing participating critics for being selective in their treatment of material. At best, these tensions cause everyone to rethink their criteria of 'quality'. At worst, these imperatives turn the task of representation into a burden, impeding critical judgement and analysis, and functioning ultimately to police all conflict, selection and critique.

In the course of the CBC event, there was little scheduled opportunity to discuss films or do more than reiterate already published papers. The week-long programme was, nevertheless, marked by a series of 'eruptions' that made clear the differences within the community, particularly the British contingent (and these conflicts would probably have spread had more North Americans been present). The black British visitors are part of a black arts sector that has achieved unparalleled prominence in the '80s. At the centre of this activity and debates are the London-based black workshops, each of which has produced work that has been found to be controversial for political and/or aesthetic reasons. For outsiders, the dividing lines appeared to be between the theoretically-oriented workshops and independent film-makers in the documentary tradition. In the absence of opportunities for debate on political, aesthetic and generational differences, the conflict was projected onto critics, reformulated as an argument over conventional social documentary's legitimacy, and an insistence that criticism be compelled to legitimate it once again, and concomitantly denigrate aesthetic issues from

whatever angle possible. The closing panel, consisting of atomised presentations from the film-makers present, only enforced the notion that celebration and critical debate were mutually exclusive. All these tensions seemed to point to a crucial, unanswered question – namely, can a conference ‘celebrating’ black cinema address whether a black cinematic aesthetic can be identified at all?

If there was any consensus during CBC, it was that the question of aesthetics was at the root of the difficulties. This was apparent in the resistance to critical positions which foregrounded formal issues and in certain arguments, such as Clyde Taylor’s rejection of the very concept of aesthetics. In his essay ‘We Don’t Need Another Hero: Anti-Theses on Aesthetics’, Taylor imputes diabolic intent to Western aesthetics in order to argue for its categorical rejection, however much such a view negates distinctions between aesthetic theories and the institutions and political entities that deploy them for specific ends. Taylor claims that Western aesthetic discourse, the inception of which he locates as coincidental with the Enlightenment and the rise of industrial capitalism, has functioned historically to uphold a depoliticising formalism, which excludes any cultural work that does not conform to Eurocentric ‘bourgeois’ aesthetic ideals.

Leaving aside the anachronisms involved in the interchangeable use of the term ‘aesthetics’ and ‘aestheticism’, I would argue that in his conflation of Western aesthetics with ‘Aesthetics’ (‘all aesthetics are western’), and the reduction of aesthetic philosophy to Kantianism, Taylor repeats the epistemic violence of dominant institutions by assuming that the ‘official’ representation of aesthetics in the modern period reflects all aesthetic discourse in an all-inclusive manner. Such an undialectical approach, collapsing historiography and history, cannot account for the counter-hegemonic tendencies within aesthetic discourse and practices themselves. I would not be the first to point out that not all aesthetics are Western, nor are they all Kantian, neo-Kantian or formalist. Nor would I be the first, in light of decades of social historical research, to refuse to ignore the counterhegemonic impact of the cultural practices of disempowered groups on dominant aesthetics, as Mikhail Bakhtin’s account of the influence of popular language and culture on the novel would suggest. Contrary to Taylor’s assumptions, the Western bourgeoisie were not and are not the only group to marshal formal notions of beauty, as West African sculptures’ highly refined, codified, non-realist, symbolic renderings of the figure would indicate, as they did, for example, to Picasso. Given the textual evidence of the philosophical and theological treatment of aesthetic issues prior to capitalism and the influence of those debates on aesthetic debates ever since, it seems highly problematic to place the rise of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, or to speak of a post-aesthetic discourse in the present. To claim that a post-aesthetic discourse is needed to undermine formalism negates a history of ethical and artistic debate, which, at least since the development of Marxist aesthetics, has been concerned with the historical embeddedness of aesthetic forms and their evaluation. Unfortunate

antecedents to such 'total' dismissals of aesthetics coincide with the most repressive moments in revolutionary movements, when political imperatives and puritanical zeal lead to suspicion of formal enquiry and intellectual labour. Without aesthetics, and more specifically, without an approach to the formal properties of cultural works, we have no place from which to understand the specificity of art, a situation that only encourages facile and reductive slogans to be enumerated by 'critics' and censors alike.

Given the economic realities of film production, and the consequent dependence of film-makers on institutions beyond their control, it is especially important that criticism account for the sociopolitical context of a work. Moreover, in light of the gross imbalance of access that Third World media production has to distribution and the chronic underrepresentation of Third World peoples in mainstream image production, any serious critical discourse on the Third World must account for the influence of these factors on the nature of independent production, as does Julio Garcia Espinosa in his groundbreaking 'For an Imperfect Cinema'.⁵ To couch valid assertions, however, in a racialised rhetoric of refusal neglects the hybrid experience of diasporic peoples, whose relation to the aesthetic, be it Western or non-Western, imposed, assimilated, creolised or rejected, has nonetheless been a constant feature of modernity and should be understood as such.

Teshome Gabriel's 'Thoughts on Nomadic Aesthetics and the Black Independent Cinema' extends his search for symbols and structures to accommodate black experiences and black cinema from his previous work, *Third Cinema in the Third World*.⁶ A collage of poems, reflections, diagrams and graphics, the piece evokes nomadism in its style, but is confused by its literal interpretation of the nomadic metaphor – that since nomadism is originally from the Third World, it can be applied to define cultural work of peoples originally from the Third World. It is further weakened by its methodological inadequacy for the interpretation of more conventional black films, and its lack of explanation of the effects of material constraints on aesthetic choices. In his search for a non-Western model, Gabriel is left without the means to address an essentially industrial medium. More puzzling, however, is Gabriel's assertion that the nomad's story is necessarily a woman's story. Not unlike Taylor's claim that 'post-aesthetics' incorporates elements of feminist criticism, this gesture constitutes little more than lip service to sexual politics.

Perhaps what was most disturbing about these chivalrous gestures, was that they were taking place in a virtual vacuum. The CBC conference and publication were marked by a lack of sensitivity to issues of sexuality and gender. Replicating an extremely traditional, and even repressive hierarchy in its organisation, CBC's division of labour consisted of a book in which the only female voice was that of the co-editor, and all-male scholarly panels (with a female keynote speaker, Toni Cade Bambara, whose paper was not published in the book). I found this particularly appalling in light of the enormous contributions made by

⁵ Julio Garcia Espinosa, 'For an Imperfect Cinema', in Armand Mattelart and Seta Singlaub (eds), *Communications and Class Struggle: 2. Liberation, Socialism*, New York, International General, 1983.

⁶ Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation*, Ann Arbor, UMI Research Press, 1982.

black American women film-makers and cultural theorists to independent media, and even more disheartening given their cogent critiques of the masculinist underpinnings of cultural nationalism. Of the American work in the programme, the only example of an implicit critique of the politics of representation was Camille Billops's critique of stereotypes of femininity, beauty and the love story genre in her film, *Older Women and Love* (1987), though its transgression operates largely at the level of content.

The rejection of aesthetics, linked with resistance to the politics of representation paved the way for wholesale misinterpretation of Kobena Mercer's analysis of dialogic and monologic tendencies in black British cinema. Contrary to the accusations levied by several independent documentarians, Mercer's article, 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination', provides a sympathetic historical account of the relation of form and context in black independent cinema in Britain. Rhetorical strategies, including those of the 'tell it like it is' documentaries, Mercer argues, are a result of social and political imperatives, and economic factors:

*... the substantive concern with the politicising experience of black youths in films such as **Pressure** (dir. Horace Ove, 1974) and **Step Forward Youth** (dir. Menelik Shabazz, 1977) demonstrates a counter-reply to the criminalising stereotypes generated and amplified by media-led moral panics in the '70's... And as **Struggles for the Black Community** (dir. Colin Prescod, 1983) shows, the historical emphasis in this counterdiscourse is an overdetermined necessity to counteract the dehistoricising logic of racist ideology. (pp 52-53)*

Mercer then goes on to assert that the motives for and objectives of those formal choices do not dissolve their dependency on ideologically problematic forms, establishing the political, aesthetic and generic distinctions within black film practice that continue to be a source of bitter debate. Realist methods, Mercer contends, operate within aesthetic values central to the dominant film and media culture, hence the black producers who use them must 'redefine the referential realities of race through the same codes and forms as the prevailing film language whose discourse of racism it aims to contest' (p 53). While such films can offer an immediate source of alternative information, 'such communicative efficacy in providing counter-information exhausts itself once the political terrain changes' (p 53). In addition, the tenet of authenticity is virtually incompatible with the strictures of narrative drama, since 'typical' experiences are presumed to stand for every black person's perception of reality. Characterising this mimetic conception of representation as monological, Mercer then contrasts it with semiotic approaches which 'by intervening at the level of cinematic codes of communication... interrupt the ideological purpose of naturalist illusion and perform a critical function by liberating the imaginative and expressive dimension of the filmic signifier as a material reality in its own right' (p 54). Drawing on Bakhtinian theories of the carnivalesque and Braithwaite's

concepts of creolisation and interculturalisation, Mercer offers a rationale and method for formal readings of films such as *Territories* and *Handsworth Songs*. Rather than refusing ideas from European artistic practices, Mercer writes, black cultural producers must direct their energies to evaluating how diasporic peoples are already inscribed within them, to discern and distinguish critical appropriation from imposition and/or assimilation.

Though not overtly stated, this argument allows for an awareness of how relations of power and control are important factors in processes of cultural appropriation and assimilation. This is particularly crucial, since the shift from essentialist to political categories of race, coupled with poststructuralist scepticism about identity and deconstructive relativism, could easily appear to be an abdication of any concern over who is actually engaged in critical debates. It is one thing to argue for delimiting and legitimating experiments in representational strategies, but it is quite another to call for a free for all in the political sphere of representation.

To return for a moment to Taylor's argument, if aestheticist tendencies have been instrumental in the exploitation of disempowered cultures, it has been precisely through their disavowal of the power relations involved in the formal appropriation of and subsequent capitalisation on Third World culture. Indeed, arguments about the aesthetic 'appreciateability' of Haitian painting were used by the Surrealists, and of graffiti by many gallerists and critics in the early 1980s. And since the radical student groups of the 1960s adopted the symbols and rhetoric of Third World nationalist movements, an identification with the generically oppressed Third World 'other' has been the favoured proof of a First World's artist/intellectual's political correctness. Yet, the concern for abstract oppression abroad is not equivalent to the recognition of the problems within one's immediate environment – what the Black Panthers called domestic imperialism. More often than not, the avant-garde has balanced its fascination with foreign others with miserly tokenism and/or disavowal of the black and Third World artists within proximity, and people of colour in general. The problems and dangers of the current phase of multiculturalism lie in the apparent inability of many efforts to transcend this legacy of exploitation. To some extent, the institutional demands to justify public funding require the deployment of arguments that in themselves engender highly problematic, often racist, structures. For if black separatist organisations are compelled to produce 'celebrations' and bear the burden of representation, the (white) avant-garde is equally compelled to propagate a curatorial discourse, with its rhetoric of discovery and retrieval, its mission to preserve hitherto unrecognised wonder from oblivion, and its implicit power to designate art status in its objects.

The New York event, organised by French critic Berenice Reynaud and white American independent film-maker Yvonne Rainer, took the form of an extensive series of documentaries, experimental short film and independent features from the US, Western Europe, Australia,

Senegal, Tanzania, Mexico, Brazil, Nicaragua, the Philippines and Taiwan. The majority of the works were produced by women – no works by white males were included, but a handful of films were made by black Latino and Asian men. Of the three panels, there were two in which media producers regarded as ‘people of colour’ predominated, ‘Exclusionary Practices: Political Expediency and/or Social Necessity’ and ‘The Responsibility of Representing the Other’, and one in which white feminist theorists were in the majority, ‘The Visualization of Sexual Difference’. The event was not exclusively devoted to Third World films or to questions of race – in fact, the majority of films in the series were produced by white women from the First World. Though the very title implicitly assumes that sexism and colonialism can be addressed together as subsets of misrepresentation, the racial politics inscribed in the event were the source of the most heated debates. And as more than one participant was to point out, the events’ locations – the Collective for Living Cinema and the Dia Art Foundation – were, until quite recently, bastions of overwhelmingly white avant-garde cultural practices.

Above all, the rhetoric of the compensatory gesture which underpinned the collective’s ‘corrective’ series was highly problematic – as if decades of racism and sexism could be overcome through a *single* event, rather than through a fundamental revamping of institutions and an ongoing critique of their selection processes.

The fetishisation of rarity in the avant-garde art world detracts from an inquiry into the reasons for the relativity of that rarity in the first place. At no point during the ‘Sexism, Colonialism’ conference was it clearly stated to whom this ‘corrective’ was addressed, though the predominantly white, female, art world intelligentsia was the actual audience. If we look at the films in the programme produced by people of colour – Julie Dash’s *Illusions*, Charles Burnett’s *Killer of Sheep*, Stanley Nelson’s *Two Dollars and Dream*, or Sarah Maldoror’s *Samibizanga*, for example – many of them are among the films most frequently shown in Third World exhibition circuits and festivals. Their ‘rarity’ then relates to the white mainstream and white avant-garde venues and their exclusionary practices. On the other hand, the panels did not include critiques of white avant-garde and activist appropriation of people of colour and the Third World. These representations, it seemed, were not to be ‘corrected’.

Since the early ’70s, the reigning interpretation of Eurocentric film theory has led to the fetishisation of formal complexity and the obsessive search for visual illustrations of psychoanalytic ‘truths’. This has encouraged institutionalised segregation and the blanket dismissal of cinema verité and activist documentary film and video. The recent multicultural events appear to be attempting to break down this segregation by including works, primarily documentary, by people of colour, and by a renewed theoretical focus on the so-called other. These events are, nonetheless, situated within a terrain that has been historically exclusionary. Endemic to this history are structured absences that func-

tion to maintain relations of power. To put it bluntly, no one has yet spoken of the 'self' implicit in the 'other', or of the ones who are designating the 'others'. Power, veiled and silent, remains in place. The multicultural crisis of conscience, from the point of view of the empowered sector (relatively speaking, of course, since the avant-garde rarely perceives itself as empowered) has shifted political attention to the so-called margins of cultural productivity. Here, the rediscovery of cultural work produced by people of colour falls into a pattern of 'othering' within film studies. As Ana Lopez has recently argued,

To a large extent, film scholarship's fascination with the identification of oppositional film practices – be they film noir, the woman's film, the structural avant-garde, or the New Latin American Cinema – must be seen as an effect of our interest in discontinuity as a progressive strategy that can be contrasted to an assumed standard, fixed and continuous history or institution – specifically Hollywood cinema.⁷

While identification of other cinemas presumes a fixed standard, the constitution of the 'other' around an absent centre reaffirms that centre, or rather, it confirms the central role of those avant-garde institutions and the individuals who act as intermediaries in the current arts scene. In this context, the contemporary version of imperialism as social mission, or the curatorial rhetoric of saving films from oblivion, serves as necessary complement to the re-centring of the avant-garde. The attention to the 'others' stresses otherness, reaffirming the role of the intellectual who interprets those experiences.⁸ Not only does the institutional preference for ethnic testimony confirm the dependency of Third World artists on intellectual intermediaries, it also functions to create an illusion of authenticity – that 'real' others are called to speak for the category they represent, producing a spectacle of identity, atomised, stereotyped, and fetishised by the setting and structure of the events. But if the illusory presence of the other serves to justify the intellectual's role, the absence of any interrogation of the identity and ethnicity of the implied 'self' transforms race into a problem of the other. Racial identities are not only black, Latino, Asian, Native American and so on, they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalising it. Without specifically addressing white ethnicity, there can be no critical evaluation of the construction of the other.⁹

These structured absences in multicultural discourse took on a particular cast at the 'Sexism, Colonialism' conference. While the majority of panelists were people of colour, the organising principles of the discussions were drawn from (largely French) feminist psychoanalysis. Throughout the conference there operated a Eurocentric presumption that sexual difference could be separated from other forms of difference and that the theoretical models that privilege gender-based sexual difference could be used to understand other differences. The first panel appeared to suggest that separatism was the province of non-white groups alone, for there was no representative of white, middle class First

⁷ Ana Lopez, 'An "Other" History: The New Latin American Cinema' in *Radical History Review*, no 41, April 1988, p 98.

⁸ In her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addresses this problem. See *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, Urbana and Chicago, The University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp 271-313.

⁹ Hazel V Carby addresses this issue in 'White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in *The Empire Strikes Back*, London, Hutchinson, 1982, pp 212-235.

¹⁰ The work of Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon are of particular importance on this issue.

World feminism or the overwhelmingly white avant-garde film community to speak on the political expediency of organising without people of colour. The second panel in which feminist psychoanalysis and white critics predominated, did not officially include any interrogation of the Eurocentric prioritisation of sexual difference nor did it address the division of labour between white critics and non-white producers: at no point was there any discussion of the visualisation of racial difference or of the Third World in films such as Lizzie Borden's *Born in Flames*, with its racialised divisions of 'revolutionary' feminism, Ulrike Ottinger's work in China, or Deborah Schaffer's *Fire from the Mountain*, about Sandinista leader Omar Cabezas.

Panelist Bell Hooks, in her commentary on her colleagues' presentations, pointed out that it was only within an exclusionary intellectual context such as the deployment of Eurocentric psychoanalytic theory that sexual difference could be extricated from other differences such as race and class. Attempts were made to defend psychoanalysis from its detractors by insisting on its limitations, but at no point would the exponents of feminist psychoanalysis take on the deeper implications of the critique – that the problem lies not with psychoanalysis, which has been used in several contexts to account for the sexualisation of racial difference¹⁰, but rather with the institutions and individuals who deploy it in exclusionary, fetishistic ways.

For reasons probably both personal and political, some of the so-called 'others' among the panelists chose to question the premises for their presence and questioned the label 'other' and/or 'exclusionary practitioner'. In the course of the first panel, Linda Mabelot and Isaac Julien were quick to point out that it was exclusion from white institutions that led to their opting for ethnically and/or racially based organisations. Mari Carmen de Lara noted that the class differences between the middle class Mexican women film-makers in her group and the working class female subjects of her films constituted a dichotomy within a single sex organisation as overdetermined, challenging and even painful as any other differentiating paradigm. Isaac Julien turned the question of expediency back to the institutions, indicating that accommodationist strategies only allow for a small space for the 'others', creating a situation in which tokenist gestures can take the form of grants and function as ideological pay-offs. One of the few to critique paternalistic assumptions about Third World film-makers' 'responsibility', Julien unravelled the assumptions that relegate black cinema to a form of advocacy or social work.

The power dynamics generated by racial imbalance in the composition of the audience was the subject of Bell Hooks' introductory comments about the discrepancy between her anticipated and actual listeners and its effect on her speech. Trinh T Minh-Ha noted that the changeability of her 'difference', depending on which context she addressed, might not be accountable by a single term. Beni Matias rejected the perception of her as an 'other' before affirming her sense of mission, while Michele Wallace asserted in her opening comments to

the final panel that intrinsic oppositionality could not be attributed to the so-called other. This comment, passed over in the course of discussion, was an extremely significant one, for the claims to essential oppositionality are precisely the meeting point of the collective fantasy of cultural nationalism, and the avant-garde's exoticising fantasy of its other. To break with both marks the transition from essentialist fetish to political and critical dialogue.

Having described aspects of contestation to multicultural category politics, I realise that I risk creating the impression that counter-hegemonic 'truths' emanate exclusively from non-white speakers. But in the case of this conference the sole white participant with a longstanding commitment to the study of a Third World culture and its cinema, Catherine Benamou, was also the only one to suggest that the implications of genres might shift in a neo-colonialist context, warning against the desire to project one's own version of oppositionality onto any situation.

Among the black and Third World participants in both events there were obvious political and aesthetic differences. There were those who unproblematically assumed the burden of responsibility and others who refused such strictures. The important question, though, is why all these media producers must be thrown together without distinguishing the genres they work in when their white counterparts are not? Is it not condescending to presume that Third World film-making is so undifferentiated as to merit only one mode of categorisation? One of the positive consequences of such distinctions might be to terminate the simplistic conflation of white, feminist, experimental cinema's supposed oppositionality with that of almost any genre produced by a black or Third World film-maker. As Hazel Carby notes, sexism and racism may be similar, but the institutions that engender them are not, nor are the forms of analysis they call for: any insistence on parallels via the reigning concept of patriarchy is ultimately a futile academic exercise.¹¹

Multicultural and separatist media events will doubtless continue to take place in New York and other areas of the US, but what are the signs of salutary coexistence? It would seem that the current state of affairs bespeaks a lack of respect and recognition of Third World institutions, which translates into biases in funding and a dearth of genuine collaboration in decision making at the level of policy and practice. On the other hand, it is painful to realise that critical analysis of problems within Third World film production continues to be marginalised within the cultural nationalist context, and that virtually anything but celebratory explication or blanket attacks on abstract foreign agents are viewed with suspicion. The opening of critical dialogue within the 'communities', of discursive dialogism in both sectors, is badly needed if we are to break with the regime of oppositional fantasy. Such a move would not only be a sign of integration, but of integrity.

¹¹ Hazel V Carby, *op cit*, p 214.



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THE MASTER TEXT AND THE JEDDI DOCTRINE

BY CLYDE TAYLOR

WHAT PASSES FOR advanced thought in the critical practice of formerly colonised peoples often reflects an effort to write one's way into the presumably progressive dimensions of western discourse, to discover phrasings making non-western disabilities compatible with western descriptions and predilections: a willingness to define oneself as whatever Other western thought requires. From some coming point of greater analytical clarity, it may be possible to make the distinction between Third World (self) deconstructivism and decolonisation.

Decolonisation demands a radical critique of the dominant modes of western thought. For this work to progress, isolated moments of productive disenchantment must be gathered at strategic junctures into broader interpretative frames to serve as platforms for increasingly independent revisions, and to make more rapidly obsolete the face-value reception of western discourses.

The major enabling interpretative frame for such work is, of course, the concept of the Third World. Despite its imperfections, it provides an indispensable cognitive position outside (but not entirely unresponsive to) western hegemonic thought. What preserves the Third World idea as necessary is the refreshing and invigorating *difference* in the possibilities of its developing concepts and positions in comparison to the west.

Another less central but nevertheless useful and important frame, for the interpretation of cinema and the politics of representation, is 'post-aesthetics', by which is meant the refusal to accept at face value the western-originated notion of the aesthetic and the lines of interpretation that flow from that platform. The theoretical embarrassments to that concept accumulating from decolonist, feminist, Marxist and post-structuralist discussions, have created the possibility for wholesale dis-

enchantment with its seductions. A fuller critique of aesthetic discourse is now under way.¹ I want here to enlist a postaesthetic perspective partly to explain and partly to justify a style of argument that deals summarily with issues that usually command more subtlety and finesse.

A P Foulkes demonstrates a rationale for dismissing formalist arguments in certain instances. Foulkes takes issue with Steve Neale's structuralist method of classifying Nazi propaganda films², distinguishing between the propagandistic character of an anti-semitic documentary *Der ewige Jude* (1940) and the non-propagandistic (in Neale's reading) anti-semitic fictional film *Jud Süß* (1940), because the latter is 'a classical fiction text'. 'When we look back today at various Nazi propaganda films,' counters Foulkes, 'it may seem possible to fix them at different points on a spectrum ranging from fiction to documentary. . . . From the point of view of reception in the Third Reich, however, this type of structural differentiation is insignificant, for all these films functioned similarly in the way they manipulated' interpretative frames.³

I would similarly suggest that many distinctions and interpretations of narrative representation in western cinema shrink in significance beside their coherence in functioning to uphold racial hierarchies. One site for such an argument is narrative in classical Hollywood cinema. Classical narrative structure is characterised by its clearly defined beginning, middle and end, in which an individual hero encounters and overcomes a series of difficulties, many embodied by a maleficent antagonist, often in a climactic encounter that precedes a formal narrative closure in which all loose ends are tied up.

From a decolonist viewpoint, an important diachronic congruity exists between this paradigm and two others: the recent recognition of the ideological import of narrative in the writing of history, and the analysis of master narratives as a kind of grammar dominating storytelling in a given cultural domain.⁴ A decolonist perspective reads these three discourses as variants of the same phenomenon. The pattern of classical narrative is effectively isomorphic with the master narrative of western civilisation in its continuities from the defining example of the human drama as embodied in the life of Christ, then as the struggle of capitalist rationality to overcome nature and less instrumentally rationalistic cultures; these two are challenged by the more recent Marxist revision, in which the key struggle is class conflict between proletariat and bourgeoisie. All three narrativise 'history' as progression towards a formal closure on a utopian terminus of one sort or another.

What remains consistently foregrounded in the master narrative of contemporary western society, recapitulated in countless entertainments, is the march through time of the western patriarchal bourgeoisie. It is a paradigm that symbolically rationalises the marginalisation of hierarchical inferiors. A decolonist reading of hegemonic narrativity reads the operative metaphor as master, as in master copy of a reproductive system, which is consistent with Jameson's deployment of the term.⁵ But it also reads it as master, as opposed to mistress or maid,

¹ My version of this critique is put forward in 'Black Cinema in the Postaesthetic Era', forthcoming in a collection of essays on Third Cinema, to be published by the British Film Institute. But see also Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1984; Laura Kipnis, 'Aesthetics and Foreign Policy', *Social Text*, Fall, 1986, pp 89-98; Susan Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1986; Roger Taylor, *Art an Enemy of the People*, Sussex, Harvester, 1978.

² Steve Neale, 'Propaganda', *Screen* Autumn 1977, vol 18 no 3, pp 9-40.

³ A P Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, London, Methuen, 1983, p 74.

⁴ See Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1987; Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1981.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *ibid.*

⁶ See, for example, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985; Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1986; Gerald Mast, *A Short History of the Movies*, New York, Macmillan, 1986.

⁷ As a means of absolving their Eurocentric limits, some recent film studies texts append a few remarks about Third World cinema. What these fail to convey is the way Third World practice gives a different look to concepts of cinema. A case in point is Pam Cook (ed), *The Cinema Book*, New York, Pantheon, 1985, which despite its totalising title, excludes discussion of racial and Third World representation, while feminist and Marxist analyses abound.

⁸ See June Jordan, 'Beyond Apocalypse Now', *Civil Wars*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1981, pp 169-177.

in which case it contains a narrativised justification of gender relations; master as opposed to 'man' or servant, wherein it legitimates class relations; and master against slave, rationalising the relations of racial and colonial domination. Two of the subtexts legitimating subordination, through class and gender, have provoked their countertexts, not merely to the order upheld by these social symbolics, but as developed critiques of narrative strategies as well.

As the decolonist critique of this master text develops, it locates the overwhelming and crucial characteristic in its Eurocentrism, the law of western rule, a consideration only slightly acknowledged in other counter-textual critiques. That Marxism, as the most persuasive counter-statement to the class hierarchy posited in the liberal humanist master text, has produced its own alternative key narrative, and one that reads the cultural oppression of non-western peoples as secondary contradictions – in other words, sub-plots – betrays one limit of the segmented resistance to the dominant frame of knowledge. Marxist assaults on the master narrative, such as Jameson's, only modestly disturb its Eurocentrism, if at all. Formalist interventions of high modernism, which Jameson thoughtfully scrutinises, posed no greater threat to this Eurocentrism than did the bourgeois realism that Lukacs, in the wake of Marx and Engels, foregrounded as model of fictive narrativity.

Historians of classical cinema break off its high stage of development around 1960⁶, not as a vanishing point but as a turn at which the unchecked hegemony of its stylistic canons began to face alterations and oppositions, arising from television, the reawakening of interest in European art cinema, the emergence of 'the New Hollywood', and the challenge of Third World cinema⁷. We might ask what this shift, whether ideological or stylistic, has to do with the prospect of non-western representation? Something, a great deal, but something different from its meaning in western film studies.

From the standpoint of race, classical cinema narrative, from the 1960s on, experienced perturbations that had no significant impact on the master narrative. Of small account to the struggle for democratic representation were the films of the New Hollywood, remembering the gratuitous 'nigger' gibes of Scorsese's films, the racism of Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979)⁸ and Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Year of the Dragon* (1985), the last three limning alienated caricatures of Asians.

The aesthetics-based discussion of classical and post-classical cinema must be superseded by a dissection of the socio-political implications of mastered narrativity in the contemporary period of cinematic representation. There is a need to play off western canonical figurations of cinema/art movements and cycles against the persistence within them, if by mute acquiescence, of western hegemony. From this perspective such critical figurations reveal more about themselves and their contradictions than about the more substantive problematic of dominant representation. They may accordingly play a minor role in a dialectical analysis of the master narrative and its continuous historical adjust-

ments (assimilations and recodings). The relevance of scrutiny of dynamics within the master text, as opposed to mere observation of its persistence, is borne out in three contexts. First, as it reveals signifying shifts in strategies of cultural representation and misrepresentation as symptomised by specific texts. Second, for its payload of meaningful connection between these cultural texts and representations and the cumulative text of history, viewed as the perpetual search for the command of meaning deduced from social activity of the past and the present. And, finally, for the illumination of this historical text as the ultimate object of inquiry (understanding the official versions as fictions of western need and imagination). Scrutiny of the master text provides a point of synthesis for the interpretation of historical 'fact' and fiction, just as it does for the interrogation of form and meaning.

These arguments can be illustrated through a re-examination of the blockbuster of the 1970s, *Star Wars* (1977), where the apparent revitalisation of classical cinema was made dramatically evident. This movie, directed by George Lucas, one of the 'movie brats' who ushered in 'New Hollywood' might more accurately be titled *The Rebirth of a Nation*. Reviewers of the film located its original mythical topography in widely scattered quarters: mediaeval romance, Wagnerian Gothic, Samurai epic (*The Hidden Fortress*, directed by Kurosawa, 1958), Sherwood Forest, Oz, Tarzan's jungle. But none of these lineages recruits and organises the meanings of the film toward ideological self-exposures like that mythological source of film school pedagogy, 'the first film classic and blockbuster', the Civil War extravaganza directed by D W Griffith.

In Griffith's rewriting of history, the fall from white protestant grace was caused by the 'introduction' of the African upon American soil. That same brutish African who, unleashed by Northern scallywags and radical Democrats upon the defeated Confederacy, threatens to barbarise white womanhood and the civilised values of the tribe, until a son of the South, in a flash of inspiration, invents the white-robed, mystical order of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, who ride to the rescue in triple-tiered, parallel montage that climaxes the salvation and hence birth of the nation.

In the *Star Wars* trilogy, the mythic identities of the patriarchal South are future-thrown into outer space, but actually get no further than the Third World. The crucial Manichean struggle is between the malevolent, materialist Empire and the Jeddi knights for the Third World, that is, 'the universe'. For all its indeterminacy, the 'Third World' conveys identities that deserve recuperation from its analogues in western symbolism and narrative. There, its identities signify the unknown, exotic region beyond the safety of the secured social organisation. It is the wilderness from which, in Puritan imagination, the Indians who appeared could only be identified as godless savages. It is the space outside the colonial settlers' stockade, where children disappear and maidens are ravished. It is the jungle, the ghetto, the island of Manhattan in *Escape from New York* (1981); it is the zone, liminal and transliminal, in the TV series *Max Headroom*, where people are kidnapped for their body

⁹ See Robin Wood, op cit, p 174 ff.

¹⁰ 'Marse Chan' is the prototypical story from lost cause Southern literature in which slaves are so loyal to their former masters, once emancipated, that they insist on serving them without pay, and long for the good old days when slavery was in flower. Thomas Nelson Page, *In Ole Virginia: Marse Chan and Other Stories*, New York, Scribner, 1877.

¹¹ A US pop variant of the British term, 'wog'.

organs. By extension, it is the outer space from which grotesque and barbaric aliens and para-humans appear to menace the fragile circle of light embracing western humanism. In the *Star Wars* trilogy, it is masked yet signified in those cyborgs and kinky proto-humans, the half Koala Bear-half Japanese Ewoks, the freaks who populate the unsavoury saloon (otherwise identified as a gay bar⁹) in *Star Wars*, or decorate Jabba's lair in *Return of the Jeddi* (1983).

Common to both *Birth of a Nation* (1915) and the *Star Wars* trilogy is spectacular derring-do on an imperial scale. The symphonic manipulation of parallel cutting in *Birth of a Nation*, for the tri-level ride of the KKK, is found again in the intercutting among three chase-battle-rescue sequences deployed as the climactic struggle in *Return of the Jeddi*. But the trilogy also includes a great deal of ideological baggage that film schools can be held accountable for only indirectly – through the widespread practice of exalting the aesthetic and formalist innovations of *Birth of a Nation* while ignoring its racism.

Read diachronically, the narrative homologies between *Birth of a Nation* and *Star Wars* click beyond the possibility of accident. The historical setting is a futuristic version of post-Civil War Reconstruction. Princess Leia is divinely inspiring, pure white Victorian womanhood, Lillian Gish reincarnated, the symbolic pawn that must be rescued and protected from Darth Vader and his evil designs. Darth Vader (dark invader?) is the upstart commander of 'black' political forces, threatening a weakened, but spiritual, refined, and honour-bound version of the 'South'. The peril of Princess Leia's virginity is registered in the spectacle of her bikini-clad body tied to the throne of the swarthy toad-monster, Jabba. The mystical mumbo jumbo about 'the Force' reveals the Jeddi knights to be the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan updated, their laser-swords a high-tech reprint of the sword symbol of the KKK, an inverted, burning cross. Among other modifications in this recycled Reconstruction epic, R2D2 and C-3PO take the place of those sassy, back-talking darky house servants, of equally mechanical loyalty to their betters. Modulating the Marse Chan motif¹⁰, Yoda, a Third World 'woogie'¹¹, is granted the role of keeper of the secret wisdom of knightly honour to pass on to Luke Skywalker before he gratefully expires – an Uncle Remus to the gentry of the future.

This would make Luke Skywalker a member of the tragic, lost-cause generation born too late to serve in the great conflict that spawned a wasteland out of the civilisation of chivalry and honour that had flourished 'bêfo de wah'. 'Lost, lost, all lost', drawls *Streetcar*'s Blanche DuBois. *Belle Rêve* is the world she laments – Beautiful Dream. Skywalker is the mythic contemporary of Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon, Griffith and, late-comer to the myth, William Faulkner; those forlorn adolescents, dreaming nostalgically beneath the veteran's drinking table where they hear tales of gallant men charging heedlessly into the jaws of death, to save a civilisation nobler than any except perhaps ancient Greece. This makes Ben Kenobi a cavalier knight-captain of the Confederacy. Perfect for this role is his

whispering from the beyond of the high obligations of the quasi-religious 'Force' in protecting civilisation from extinction – a kind of Robert E Lee/Hamlet's ghost-father exhorting from the grave.

His name identifies Luke Skywalker as a WASP of ancient, biblical lineage with a hint of Native American blood legitimacy. By contrast, Han Solo is identifiable as a half-Northern, half-Southern European white ethnic, a blue-collar tinkerer yearning for the chance to 'pop a woman' way above his class. And further down the racial-status hierarchy, Chewbacca is a (tobacco-chewing?) good ole boy with less brain but more brawn. Described as a 'wookie' (read 'woogie'), his ethnic purity must remain suspect.

The racist undertones of the light/good *versus* dark/evil Manicheanism of this social fantasy are cemented by the accent on blood purity. In *Jeddi*, we learn, Princess Leia is Luke's blood sister (sister protection is also a theme of *Birth of a Nation*) and – further astonishment – we learn that the Force can only be transmitted by blood, a notion that is noted as 'very unAmerican' by Pauline Kael.¹² To be sure, this idea is uncharacteristic of stated US political ideology, but consistent with the scripture of genetically-based North American cultural self-image. It is of a piece with Faulkner's recapitulation of the 'American dream' in *The Bear*, where the WASP Puritan's role in the wilderness is to uphold a covenant with God to maintain suzerainty over His/their kingdom and the lower orders of apprentice humanity. The extension of this concept – the sociocultural basis of the Monroe doctrine – to outer space might be called the Jeddi doctrine.

The recycling of story lines in North American popular culture is understood as reification, cultural commodification. But it also indicates the resilience of the master narrative, which controls the productions of even some of the most wary or resistant contemporary authors, who suppose they are controlling or even subverting it. Yet the particularities of *Star Wars* and its synchronisms with *Birth of a Nation* spring from determinants more historically specific than their coexistence as variants of the traditional narrative text.

Their synchronicity lies in concordances between the Reconstruction period that *Birth of a Nation* mythologised, the moment at which the film was made, and the times in which the *Star Wars* fantasy caught hold. The late 1970s, when *Star Wars* changed the course of cinema production, was a moment when the utopian lustre of the American dream was dulled; not lost, but more vibrant as nostalgia than prospect. The grounds for this tremor in confidence could be found in the contradictions of advanced capitalism. The US in those years was shifting from being a creditor to a debtor nation. The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy was perhaps equally unsettling. This anxiety can be read in the film, and provides points of interesting sameness/difference to the socio-economic grounds of the earlier blockbuster. There is, for instance, the refurbishing in *Star Wars* of the technocratic myth, along reassuring lines where high-tech serves civilisation, and serves it best when motivated by *belief* in the non-materialistic 'Force', and where

¹² Pauline Kael, 'Fun Machine', *The New Yorker*, May 30, 1983, p 88.

¹³ For example, *Who Killed Victor Chin?* (1988), a film by Chris Choy and Renée Tajima, relates the murder of a Chinese-American youth by auto workers in Detroit who take him for Japanese. Distributed by Film News Now, New York.

it is 'on our side'. But this version of the future was curiously symptomatic of the problems of the US economy, reflecting a kind of cottage industry version of high-tech culture, a primitive mode of production, slighting the computer/telecommunications marvels of *Star Trek* and other 'Fortune 500' science fiction.

The unease of US society in those years is also connected to the new experience of challenge to the hitherto unquestioned hegemony of the west. The *Star Wars* phenomenon provides a characteristic psychological displacement in which the decline of world power in the United States, for a variety of economic reasons, became, in popular perceptions, the fault of the Third World¹³, whose perceived ascendancy may have been merely a matter of moving closer to the position of the US in decline. Interestingly, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Star Wars* bracket a phase of US development characterised culturally by classical cinema and its optimism, and sociologically, as a period in which the naive expectations of inevitable US success were rewarded. I shall argue in a forthcoming essay that the popularity of *Birth of a Nation* among certain groups in 1915 may have drawn on North American working-class anxieties about the entry of blacks into the labour force at that time.

By the time of *Star Wars*, blacks no longer seemed to threaten the fabric of US civilisation. Hence the most notable shift in the racism of the master text, as articulated by these two films, is the shift in demonic scapegoating from blacks to the Third World. The casting of Billy Dee Williams as sidekick to the Jeddi crew, in the sequels, apparently responded to criticisms from US blacks of the first film's black/evil iconography and its all-white demographics. This accommodation fits a pattern current in Hollywood movies of those years – separating North



Billy Dee Williams as Jeddi side-kick with bad guy Darth Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back*.

American blacks from the demonology that would be directed to Third World people depicted as terrorists.

The Southern version of the national myth, with lost-cause nostalgia and paranoid convictions about menacing others has become pervasive in US culture, and redirected internationally. A minor irony is that Lyndon Johnson, Jimmy Carter, Bill Moyers and many other Southerners had largely outgrown these views at a time when they were being taken up by the Reagan right-wing.

Darth Vader turns out, in *Return of the Jedi*, to be Luke Skywalker's father. The fall from grace is, as in *Paradise Lost*, a family affair. The worst are the best inverted, the conscious infidels, who know the way from birth and training, but, through colossal perversity, set themselves against it. On a cosmological level, the evil Emperor, the Austin Stoneman/Thaddeus Stevens of the plot against gentle civilisation, is to be understood as a heretic, just as Communism has been read by the US right-wing as an evil heresy and, in the term coined by Reagan after *Star Wars*, 'the evil Empire'.

The sense of the presence and identity of corruption embodies the *need* for a menacing Manichean adversary felt by the 'interpretants' of the master text. (Ronald Reagan demonstrated this necessary displacement when, during his Hollywood years, his own ideological shift was partly motivated by his reading of totalitarian Nazism as synonymous with Soviet Communism – hence his later muddle about the significance of Bitburg.) Reagan's notorious confusion between movietone and political actuality, analysed in Michael Rogin's *Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology*¹⁴, offers an instance of the interpenetration of history and fiction within narrative. Notable is his penchant for narrativising political discourse through the use of anecdote. He seems to have suffered little loss of esteem from the US public through disclosures that these anecdotes, and the pithy idiomatic sayings that surround them, often come from movies rather than from observation or personal experience. His skill as a communicator lies mainly in his ability to recast the dilemmas of political experience within the familiar contours of received narrativity, frequently casting himself as the central, individual protagonist, facing obstacles or ruthless adversaries. On several occasions, he has effectively importuned the US Congress to support, say, aid for Nicaraguan counter-revolutionaries, by asking them to 'Pull one out for the Gipper', referring to one of his favourite and best-known roles in *Knute Rockne, All American* (1940). He was able to 'entertain' the US public/mass audience by staging, as rehearsal of the ancestral script, the invasion of Grenada, winning support for the lynching of a sovereign nation.

Not the least impressive of the effects of this particular mastery of narration is the successful casting of the US, in an exercise in democratic fascism, as the disadvantaged underdog (citing mounds of Cuban ammunition found later), despite the sublime disproportions of this portrayal. Such an axiomatic staple of narratively-reproduced popular perceptions, repeated in *Star Wars*, functions as a necessary condition of 'chosen people' history-writing.

¹⁴ Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987.

Star Wars is a clear instance of the manipulation of the representational systems encoded in the scriptural text of western ethnocentrism. Promoted as 'pure entertainment', any historical reference has been removed from the setting, and relegated to the subtextual level. As an instance of subtextual ideological reference, consider the huge four-legged fighting machines attacking the Federation in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980). Looking like mammoth tanks on long spindly legs, they are nothing less than mechanised camels. Camels? Then Arabs.

In its masking of historical reference, *Star Wars* provides an interesting contrast to *The Birth of a Nation*. The earlier film masked its racism and fascism in the guise of unmediated 'history', while the later one seems to stand outside 'history' altogether. Both films, however, operate within the racist configuration of the master narrative. In his analysis of hegemonic narrative, Jameson argues that it operates through a 'strategy of containment', eliminating all but one resolution, making it seem necessary, inevitable, logical. For the decolonised observer it seems transparent that the resolution contained within the privileged narrative is one that sees the world guided by a single, dominating leadership, and that, through all the vicissitudes of history and story, that leadership is always white and male – as if that were the only story the world has to tell.

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The new wave of black film making – **Handsworth Songs**, **Playing Away**, **The Passion of Remembrance** – has provoked contradictory and often controversial responses. This Document explores the relationship of criticism to this new cinema and the questions it raises about black experience, black identity and Britishness. Contributors are: Alan Fountain, Coco Fusco, Paul Gilroy, June Giovanni, Stuart Hall, Colin MacCabe, Kobena Mercer, James Sneed, Judith Williamson.

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TWO KINDS OF OTHERNESS: BLACK FILM AND THE AVANT-GARDE

BY JUDITH WILLIAMSON
INTRODUCED BY KOBENA MERCER

*This is the text of a talk given at a day conference on **Black Film/British Cinema** held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, in February 1988 and is reproduced here from a forthcoming ICA Document co-published by the British Film Institute. Following the contributions of Stuart Hall and Colin MacCabe at the conference, Judith Williamson identified a range of issues arising from the reception of recent black British independent films in Britain and the US. In many ways, the article concurs with and elaborates upon what Stuart Hall described as the 'politics of criticism', entailed by the recognition that, '(the) films are not necessarily good because black people make them. They are not necessary "right-on" by virtue of the fact that they deal with the black experience'.*

Developing this argument, Hall suggested that, 'Once you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject . . . you can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in place of the bad old essential white subject, the new essentially good black subject.' Considering the enthusiastic reception of the films of Sankofa and Black Audio Film Collective in the metropolitan avant-garde intellectual community, Williamson evaluates the implications of this realisation which raises a number of difficult issues for critics and criticised alike. This piece addresses such difficulties and contributes significantly to an analysis of the situation which has given rise to them.

I'm going to start from where Stuart Hall finished off. When he was talking about the possibility of a criticism that would neither hold up certain independent films quite uncritically as being 'right on', nor criticise them from a mainstream position – that's really what I've been trying to do over the last few years on the *New Statesman*. And I want to talk, not only about criticism, but about the kinds of forms available for film-makers engaging in oppositional practice, and the way our notions of those forms cross with issues of race to produce a sort of doubly Other cinema. Finally, I want to try and resuscitate the question of class, which recently seems to have been dropping right out of the race-gender-class trilogy.

I'm also starting from my own position as a critic because part of what I try to do in my work is to engage with mainstream criticism. In practice that means, for example, that in doing a critique of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (directed by Stephen Frears, 1987), a film I really didn't like, I had to spend about a third of my column engaging with Norman Stone's reactionary attack on it and carrying on that debate with other critics while trying to criticise the film as well. I think that's the kind of thing Stuart was talking about and it's quite a difficult thing to balance.

But I'd like to make a distinction between mainstream criticism and mainstream cinema. This is really quite important. While I would say I'm totally hostile to mainstream critics and the kinds of assumptions underlying almost all the

cinema criticism in the national press today, I don't feel the same extreme opposition to all forms of mainstream cinema. And I think it's important *not* to collapse together, as the oppositional movement often has done, a cinematic – i.e., film-making – practice and a critical practice. It's become a sort of tenet of the oppositional area that we all move in (and not only in film, either) that practice and criticism go hand in hand, until they're almost seen as the same. This collapsing together – which is a part of that whole '70s theoretical-practice-as-part-of-practice thing – has, I think, to some extent, gone past its useful point. Because, as I said, it's important to me to be able to attack mainstream critics but not always to sweep out everything within mainstream cinema at the same time – certainly not to sweep out the mainstream cinema *audience*, which is what I mean when I talk about class in this context.

I'll come back to that point, but for now I'm setting up this slightly unfashionable dichotomy between film-making practice and criticism or theory because I want to consider the effects of their elision on the kind of oppositional area that most of us work in. I was educated as a Marxist to understand the relation between theory and practice as a dialectical relationship, where theory isn't a blueprint for action but, almost the reverse, an attempt to find translatable patterns in what *has* happened, translatable in that they can be used to help understand other situations and prevent repeating mistakes. So, as I see it, theory isn't so much a set of guidelines for what to do, but a sort of stock-taking where you try to get to grips with a situation. I'm saying this because most of us feel the pinch of certain orthodoxies that have grown up around what you could very loosely call 'Screen theory', and people are now working in an area where oppositional cultural theory sometimes feels every bit as rigid as the orthodoxies of the dominant cinematic practice we're meant to be against. I'm not saying I disagree with oppositional theories, in fact I'm one of the people who are always going around saying they should be *more* oppositional, but I am trying to diagnose something about the atmosphere in the field of independent, oppositional film-making within which the new work from black film-makers here is broadly located. I do believe our fear of criticism from one another is sometimes stronger than our engagement with those people 'out there' who we don't actually

know, but who are, in fact, the readers or viewers of our work. This fear and the anxiety that goes with it have crippling results for film-makers and critics alike. And what happens when people can't make or take criticism openly on a professional level is that it goes underground and becomes far more snide, which in turn fuels people's fear of being criticised, and so on and so on.

This is probably the moment for me to say something which I think has to be said which is that, while I don't feel uncomfortable about it, there are problems with being a white critic speaking like this and writing about black film practice. Without wanting to make too crude an analogy or simply superimpose race and gender, I know I have spent years personally complaining about male critics edging in and intervening within feminist debates about film and I am aware that I could be in a similar position here. I'm saying this not as an apology – since I was invited to speak at this event – but because it isn't often discussed and there seems to be enormous embarrassment around this area. I've found – at a pragmatic level of noticing what people say in private and comparing it with what they will say or write in public – that there is a reluctance by white critics to make criticisms of films by black film-makers because they feel (sometimes quite rightly) not qualified to do so, or, to put it more bluntly, they are afraid of appearing racist.

On the one hand, I think it's quite right that white critics should hesitate when they are confronted with films coming out of a quite different experience from their own. But, on the other hand, there are, to continue being blunt, problems with being a white critic in a different way because it makes criticisms which may have some substance more easily dismissable. Kobena Mercer has written in a paper on the aesthetics of black independent film in Britain that white critics' and audience's perception of the 'influence of Euro-American avant-garde cinema and film theory' on works like *Passion of Remembrance* and *Handsworth Songs* 'suggests an underlying anxiety to pin down and categorise a practice that upsets and disrupts fixed expectations and normative assumptions about what "black" films should look like'.¹ I'm

¹ Kobena Mercer, 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain' in Mbye Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, MIT Press, 1988, p 51.

raising this particular piece of argument because it pre-empts my main point, which deals precisely with this issue, the place of avant-garde cinema, or rather, of these films within that place. The issue of theory I've already tried to deal with a bit. Anyway, whatever the status of my perceptions are as a white critic I just think the point had to be raised and it would be a strange day if nobody said it. So I'm saying it.

Coming back to what I would call oppositional criticism, the one loosely based around *Screen* or which operates in the area of developing critical practice that Stuart Hall was outlining – within this sphere there is another kind of good/bad dichotomy alongside the one he described. And I'm glad he was the person that said it: a film made by a black film-maker is not 'good' automatically because the director is black any more than a film made by a woman is good because it's made by a woman. Basically he's saying goodbye to the simplistic black-film-good/white-film-bad dichotomy in favour of a more complex way of understanding the politics of ethnicity. Of course, just saying it doesn't make it happen overnight and I think it will be some time before those black films which are especially in the limelight at the moment lose their aura of untouchability. Apart from making the critic's job more difficult, that aura must in many ways be a burden to the film-makers, who have to be constantly producing show-pieces and be on show themselves – a position which in my experience has never helped anyone to develop their work, and which reflects somewhat dubiously on the film culture that makes such demands. Those demands are, in a sense, a part of that polarity Stuart Hall described and in the long run I think it will be the highly pressurised, young black film-makers who benefit most from his attempt to dismantle this simple equation of black film-making with 'good' film-making, an equation which keeps it locked in a particular kind of Otherness.

But besides that good/bad orthodoxy centred on race which Stuart described, there is another kind of orthodoxy within this critical arena, another good/bad dichotomy which, to parody it rather crudely, says realist, narrative, mainstream cinema = bad; non-narrative, difficult, even boring, oppositional cinema = good. We must all be familiar with this and whether or not one agrees with that formulation it has had a great

influence on the kinds of positions people can take up as film-makers or critics. Pursuing my analogy with Stuart's point: there's another Other that I want to tackle from my position as film critic, which is the avant-garde as the Other of Hollywood cinema.

We've all become skilled at handling this term: as women and feminists we have become adept at understanding our position as 'Other' to male culture, and the whole black political movement has for years put forward very highly developed theories and perceptions of how the black functions as 'Other' to white culture and so on. Within film criticism I'm constantly confronted with the avant-garde or the 'difficult' as the 'Other' of Hollywood or mainstream cinema and I think this otherness is just as problematic a relationship, just as much inscribed within what it's supposed to be different from. I'm only going to invoke one theorist, but I think the work of the French writer Bourdieu is really useful in theorising the way that the place of the avant-garde in art or film as the oppositional or the difficult is one that's actually written into and circumscribed by the culture to which it's meant to be opposed.² I'm not trying to be all gloomy and suggest that one can never do anything different or oppositional or make new forms that will push people's perceptions beyond the usual – far from it; I just think that to be productively oppositional, the place occupied by the avant-garde as the structured-in opposite of the mainstream is something we have to be aware of.

Obviously, the concept of Third Cinema was developed exactly in order to avoid that mainstream/avant-garde dichotomy, in recognition of the fact that neither side of it is inherently oppositional or politicised, or, to put it differently, that the whole polarity can still be completely contained within First World and colonialist culture. The concept of Third Cinema also presupposes a different constituency, an audience which is neither necessarily the predominantly white, mainstream cinema audience nor the (also predominantly white) avant-garde, cinémathèque audience. But I don't quite know where that gets us in this context, which is, frankly, closer to the avant-garde than

² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans Richard Nice, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984.



Just as black: *People to People: A People's Account*

anything else. Looking around the room I see lots of people who were at the Third Cinema conference in Edinburgh³ where battles were raging about what black cinema was and whether a straightforward narrative film could be a truly oppositional form of film-making. I'm dragging that argument back into *this* conference because the film-makers that Kobena Mercer describes in his article as drawing on a strong Third World inheritance were actually at that event arguing *against* various African and black US film-makers who advocated what I would call fairly un-avant-garde but politically strident work. The key debate about the possibility or the concept of a black aesthetic or a specifically black form of film-making is one that's central here; because if there *isn't* such an aesthetic, then black film-makers are faced with precisely the problem that confronts all film-makers, in that rather inhibiting context which I set out to describe – which is how to pitch your work. And related to that, although it's not always within the film-makers' control, is dealing with how your work is taken up.

And that's where my point about the avant-garde comes in. It is particularly striking that the

black British work that's been taken up most widely in the world of theory, been most written about and also picked up at festivals, on tours, and so on, is the work that fits most obviously into that category avant-garde. This isn't a criticism of the work and it isn't necessarily the work's 'fault', so to speak. But, again on a level entirely to do with personal observation, the reception in somewhere like New York of Black Audio's and Sankofa's work⁴ has as much to do with its being formally inventive and, for lack of a better term, avant-garde, as to do with its being black, or rather, it's to do with the combination of the two. What I'm saying is not a criticism but an observation; I think it's helpful to make it

³ 'Third Cinema: Theories and Practices', organised by June Givanni, Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, was held at the 40th Edinburgh International Film Festival, August 11-13, 1986 and sponsored by the British Film Institute.

⁴ The work of Black Audio Film Collective includes *Expeditions: Signs of Empire/Images of Nationality* (tape/slide), 1983 and *Handsworth Songs* (directed by John Akomfrah, 1987). Sankofa's work includes *Territories* (directed by Isaac Julien, 1984), *The Passion of Remembrance* (directed by Maureen Blackwood/Isaac Julien, 1986) and *Dreaming Rivers* (directed by Martina Attille, 1988).



Experimenting with documentary in *Handsworth Songs*.

because the formal properties of those films have somehow, in most of the critical discourse surrounding them, been subsumed into their 'blackness'. Yet, say, a Ceddo film like *A People's Account* (directed by Milton Bryan/ Ceddo Film and Video Collective, 1987) is just as 'black'. Coco Fusco has said quite rightly that it's easier to import one's Others than to confront them at home. And I would add – it's sometimes easier to confront the political Other, the Other of ethnicity and, in the case, say, of *Passion*, sexuality – when it occupies the space of Other in that cinematic dichotomy I was trying to describe. Coco's monograph on the work of Black Audio and Sankofa (for whom she's arranged a tour in New York) is called *Young, British and Black*.⁵ But, more accurately, it should be called 'Young, British, Black and Avant-Garde', for this is what distinguishes the work she has chosen to tour from that of other equally young, equally British, and equally black film-makers.

Now I too, like Coco, find the work of these particular groups especially interesting, and that's precisely because I *am* interested in finding new forms and experimenting: with documentary (*Handsworth Songs*) and with narrative (*Passion of Remembrance*). All I'm saying is that we should be clear that black film-making and experimental film-making are not automatically the same thing. I'm hardly the best person to sound off at a Black Cinema Conference on whether or not there is the possibility of a black cinema (though I've always understood that question, in other contexts, as one of audience rather than aesthetic – I'll come back to this). But truly, I don't see how there can be such a thing as a homogenous black aesthetic, as became clear in the disagreements at Edinburgh. Or again, using an



Passion of Remembrance: confronting Otherness

analogy with feminist debates – where I feel better qualified to make definite pronouncements – during the '70s those of us involved in feminist discussions about cinema were endlessly having fights about 'is there a women's cinema?' (my answer is 'yes', if it's one that women watch) and 'is there a feminist or female – which I know aren't the same thing – aesthetic?' (to which I would be inclined to say 'no'). I remember a particular debate that took place at the London Filmmakers' Co-Op, about whether, if a woman was behind the camera, you would avoid having the voyeuristic gaze, analysed by Laura Mulvey as the male look at the female object.⁶ There were rows about whether or not it was wrong to have a man behind the camera even if a woman was directing. Of course it may be a hassle for quite other reasons to have a man behind the camera, but I don't think there is anything essential to gender or race about either a gaze or an aesthetic.

There is a cultural dimension to it, but then that brings us back precisely to cultural forms and how to use them. I've made this detour into feminist territory because when someone asked in the last session 'can a white person make a Third Cinema film?' my instinct was to answer 'no'. It's like 'can a man make a feminist film?'; my answer to that would be 'why the hell would a man want to *think* he was making a feminist film?'. And, frankly, that response seems to be contradictory having just said there is no inherent female (or

⁵ A touring exhibition curated by Coco Fusco and produced by Ada Griffin, presented by Third World Newsreel, May 1988. Monograph published by Third World Newsreel, 335 West 38th St, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018.

⁶ Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* Autumn 1975, vol 16 no 3, pp 6-18.

black) aesthetic. But there *is* something in between essentialism and a complete denial of people's different positions and experiences, and I think that the more concrete one's analysis of film culture, the more possibilities for it there are.

Looking at the three films at the focus of today's debate (*Handsworth Songs*, directed by John Akomfrah, Black Audio Film Collective, 1987, *Playing Away*, directed by Horace Ove, 1987 and *Passion of Remembrance*, directed by Maureen Blackwood and Isaac Julien, Sankofa Film and Video, 1986) you can see very clearly that there are common issues in black politics with which all three are engaging while aesthetically they're all very different. Just from seeing these three films it's obvious that there isn't one black aesthetic. In the light of all this I would say that any kind of oppositional or any questioning cinema is going to have to engage with both mainstream and avant-garde practices, and perhaps challenge that very dichotomy – which after all rests on all those high culture/low culture ideas. Colin MacCabe talked about the outmoded counterposition between realist and avant-garde aesthetics, but I'm going into it in more detail because I think you have to find ways to engage with *both* of them. The eliding of these two 'good/bad' polarities, with the white film = reactionary, bad/black film = progressive, good dichotomy and the mainstream film, realist = bad/avant-garde film, difficult = good dichotomy just marrying each other, lets you fill the avant-gardeness with, say, a black cinema – so you have a black, avant-garde cinema and it can function as the Other to white mainstream Hollywood stuff. I'm simply trying to draw attention to that other binary structure which I think has already begun to adhere to the first one and to pull apart all those four corners, white, black, avant-garde, mainstream.

This is where I want to come back to audiences because I think audiences do matter. I don't see how you can talk about oppositional or political film without talking about audiences. I really don't. I never have done. Audiences *do* matter. It's not enough to say 'Oh well, everything's fractured, everything's just diverse' – that's not adequate if you are to be political. If you're political you do want to reach people beyond your buddies; I think lots of issues arise here which aren't specific to black cinema but which

are important to it. There are lots of obstacles as well. There's the kind of right-on-ness of the workshop movement, into which the black groups have come fairly late, and it is a problem that the movement as a whole has never successfully grappled with, the question of audiences. Obviously it's a complicated issue and partly it's tied up with funding, money, dependency. The problem that I'm talking about though is that the struggle to set up the workshops, which I myself was involved in, was such a big one that once they were established and funded there was a huge sigh of relief and then people forgot to talk about the products, the actual films.

Thinking about actual films and how they work – I'm glad also that Stuart Hall brought up *My Beautiful Laundrette* (directed by Stephen Frears, 1986) because, outside the *Screen* circles that I, to some extent, move in, a lot of people I know who are not at all theoretical just love *My Beautiful Laundrette*. They love it! And many of them are *not*, for example, people who have thought at all about heterosexism. I'm thinking maybe of neighbours, old school friends, not people that I know professionally. It has in some way reached out to people. As Stuart said, it's been a highly *enjoyed* film. In some ways it's an absolutely classic romance. You're just dying for those people to kiss, but they're both men. And one is black and the other is white. And you're sitting there in the role of the classic Hollywood spectator thinking 'are they going to get off with each other? Is he going to say it? Will he be late?' The cinematic structures that it employs are completely mainstream; it is not an avant-garde film in its form at all. There's nothing that interesting about it visually – I don't want to be rude to the makers, but it is not a formally exciting work. And yet it had this enthusiastic reception just about everywhere except in what you might call the *Screen* world where it was, well, to put it bluntly, kind of sneered at by all those people who are anti-mainstream. I'm afraid I'm drawing on what I actually hear people say but they don't print, and I'm sorry to do that, but otherwise these things don't get properly aired. I think these issues are too important to let them slip by in odd remarks – because, as I keep saying, audiences really are important.

So my personal bench-mark of one aspect of political film-making would be, that you would

want your film – I would want my film – to reach some people, maybe not the whole of the people, maybe not a mass audience, but to reach *some* people who aren't already engaged in the kind of debates we've been talking through, certainly to reach people outside the sometimes esoteric or privileged arena of film theory. This is a very rough and ready definition, but it brings the issue of audiences back without saying either this must speak for the whole black community or this must speak for all women, or this must speak for everybody. You simply want your work to reach *somebody* outside your own circles, or at least that's what I want. And in coming back to audiences I think we are coming back to the question of class. I know that what I'm saying might be challenged by the kind of postmodernist analysis that sees everything as already fragmented, but when we're talking about mainstream cinema and why people enjoy a film like *Laundrette* we are talking about class, if not in a completely rigid sense, at least in the sense that Bourdieu addresses when he talks about 'cultural capital' – some level of education into film language and forms.

For about the first five or ten years that I watched avant-garde films, when I was a teenager, I found it really difficult; it was incredibly hard to learn to expect different things from films, not to expect resolution, not to expect closure, not to expect to care about the characters and so on. *Now*, I can truthfully say that some avant-garde movies are among my absolutely favourite films. But the point is you don't just sit down one day and find 'difficult' films really enjoyable. Without confronting that fact and its connection with class I think we're deceiving ourselves. The reason that I got to be able to like avant-garde films is because I had all that time in college and if you don't want to call it class, call it education or call it cultural capital, to take up Bourdieu's useful term.

We're talking a lot nowadays about race and gender, and their relation to representation is being very highly theorised at the moment. But it's interesting that we haven't talked so much about class and representation, because it does raise major formal issues and that is where you

come back to notions of difficulty which aren't just to be put aside. I mean the difficulty which is something to do with having a class or educational position different to the one where you learn to sit through *Wavelength* (directed by Michael Snow, 1967) without getting fidgety. Now I can do it but it took me a long time! And these are really things we have to think about.

Having started with my position as a critic I'll end by thinking from the viewpoint of a film-maker, because I think a key issue is the problem of *learning*. It's very out of date at the moment to talk about learning the skills of your medium but nevertheless that's something that film-makers have to do, just as learning to watch rather more difficult films than usual is something that audiences have to do. The whole oppositional movement has a lot to learn about cinematic pleasure. That isn't to say, 'let's make films in a totally conventional way', but to say, 'let's reclaim certain kinds of pleasurable cinematic experience without throwing them out with the politically unacceptable bathwater'. Any kind of progressive new cinema involves learning how to make films that can engage and be appealing without necessarily running back to precisely the same old realist modes. And part of that learning is actually listening (I know this sounds disgustingly like the Labour Party) to what people say about the films they see. I'm not holding that up as the only factor in making a film, but I'm emphasising it and I'm finishing on it because I think it's a thing which has been missing in many of these debates. A cavalier attitude to audiences is the very opposite of a politics that's concerned with people changing their perceptions. This may seem to have moved off the subject of black cinema, but perhaps it is a sign of the strength of black film-making practice in Britain now that we can stop asking 'what *is* black cinema' and start addressing some of the more complex questions raised by actual films and their audiences, questions which all oppositional film-makers could learn from.

This article is included in ICA Document 7, *Black Film/British Cinema*, to be published in autumn 1988.

CALL FOR PAPERS

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Screen: Broadcasting - Deregulation/Reregulation

Following a special issue in 1986 on the crisis in broadcasting, papers are requested that assess the current state of broadcasting in Britain – in the context of impending (if chronically procrastinated) legislation – and world-wide. In particular, critical analyses and commentary are sought in areas such as the following: Peacock resurgent – government proposals for radio and television; censorship, e.g., the role of the Broadcasting Standards Council, changes in the regulation of video; new technologies of reproduction and questions of copyright and 'intellectual property'; broadcasting and the 'new populism' – new efforts to integrate the audience, e.g., phone-ins and audience participation; multi-national competition (US, Japan, South Korea) and the restructuring of media production and consumption; current trends in cable and satellite provision in the UK, e.g., the role of Virgin; media trade unionism in the era of 'new realism', e.g., the TV-am dispute, casualisation, inter-union rivalry, the future of the workshop declaration; trans-European broadcasting, advertising and the search for new markets; European broadcasting policy – European Parliament and the Council of Europe proposals; the impact of new forms of regulation on the politics of representation, e.g., the decline of documentary, the notion of authorship; the diminishing role of the state in public service provision and its increasing role in moral regulation. Submissions are requested by December 1, 1988.

Screen: Melodrama in non-Hollywood Cinemas

Substantial theoretical work has been done on melodrama in recent years, but it has overwhelmingly addressed Hollywood films. It seems important, therefore, to redress the balance in favour of other contexts, such as the Third World and Europe, where melodrama has functioned as a major popular genre. The aim of this issue will be to test and challenge the important body of theory now at our disposal against non-Hollywood texts in different cultural and historical contexts. Single-film studies are not encouraged. Rather, we would like the papers to look at textual strategies across a range of films and address broader issues, such as: narrative and intertextual determination; national stars; gender and spectatorship; melodrama and the popular; the (inevitable?) relationship with Hollywood. Submissions are requested by March 1, 1989.

Inquiries and submissions to: The Editor, *Screen*, 29 Old Compton Street, London W1V 5PL, England.

BLACK FILM-MAKING IN EUROPE

BY MAUREEN BLACKWOOD
AND JUNE GIVANNI

Europe's cosmopolitan character is and has been shaped by its colonial past – a history that includes a 'black presence', whether as slaves, indentured labour, immigrants, or as exotic novelties in literature and painting. More recently, in the post-war years migrants from former colonies came to the 'mother countries', many actively encouraged to take advantage of their 'rights of entry' to help fill acute labour shortages in war-torn European economies. During the 1950s and '60s many were also motivated by the need to escape the post-colonial economic and political hardships of newly independent countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. They arrived hopeful and eager to build a new life in France, Britain, Holland, Germany, Sweden and Portugal.

Both immigrants and host nations held pre-conceived ideas about each other. Immigrants, who had been taught to revere Europe, anticipated a warm welcome; but hosts, many of whom had never seen a black person, believed them to be:

*... uncivilized, backward people, inherently inferior to Europeans ... eating strange foods, suffering from unpleasant diseases ... and lacking proper education.*¹

Yet those who for years were silenced and silent, gradually – sometimes painfully – began to speak of themselves and of their differing relations to black experience. In cinematic terms,

the process of finding a voice has only recently begun. The history and growth of black independent film-making is usually charted in direct reference to the continents of Africa and America; while such work is to be encouraged seems extraordinary that little attention is given to the growing number of black film-makers whose work concerns the experiences of black people living in Europe. This article is intended to provide the basic source material with which to chart the development of black film-making in Europe and points to the contemporary variety of its film styles. It is precisely the reinterpretation of film styles, coupled with the retrieval and reassessment of certain aspects of indigenous cultures, ways of seeing, and expression that mark the 'hybrid' nature of black cinema in Europe.

A case in point is the growing participatory profile of young blacks in Britain whose films build on the works of an earlier generation of film-makers. These pioneers were forced to operate outside the mainstream of British film production, financing their own short films receiving neither recognition nor support from established funding institutions. In so doing, they produced films which started the process of 'recognising the black presence' in the contemporary post-war European culture. Such film-makers include Lionel N'Gakane (*Jemima and Johnny*, 1966) and Lloyd Neckord, (*Ten Bob in Winter*, 1963),

¹ Peter Fryer, *Staying Power*, London, Pluto, 1984.

Frankie Dymon Jnr (*Death may be your Santa Claus*, 1969) and Horace Ove (*Pressure*, 1974), helped lay the foundations of a cinema offering from its earliest stages a glimpse of the diversity of styles, concepts, images, ways of seeing, and yet the 'sameness' of a black European experience constantly grappling with the past as it impacts on the future.

Concepts of culture and its dissemination have also played a large part in the development of black cinema in Europe. It is worth noting, for example, the differing attitudes of the French and British during colonialism and the extent to which each wished its cultural codes to be assimilated by the indigenous peoples. France has always been a keen supporter and funder of African film productions in particular, with the Ministère des Relations Extérieures arranging many co-productions for film-makers from Francophone 'territories' such as Senegal. Indeed, certain films they financed, made by the first generation of black film-makers domiciled in France, have strong similarities in style to the works of Frenchman Jean Rouch whose films often marked an entry into black cultures and bohemian lifestyles. This adaptation of dominant modes of representation can also be found in *Jemima and Johnny* which, as Jim Pines points out², captures exactly the grainy textured social realist film style prevalent in the British left-liberal independent film movement during the 1950s and '60s. Adopting Griersonian drama-documentary techniques, the film uses the tale of an innocent friendship between two youngsters to explore themes of relocation and racism. However, the film operates in stark contrast to other works of the period which use similar techniques either to problematise the situations and contexts of black individuals and communities, or embark on anthropological/ethnographic expeditions. Instead, this film both reassesses and reinterprets the techniques employed by social realism and offers the viewer different ways of seeing the emerging multi-cultural society and his/her position within it.

The critical relation of black film-makers and dominant culture is a key issue. Asked about the influence of French literature on his work, Martiniquean poet and writer Aimé Césaire stated:

I don't deny French influences myself . . . but I want

*to emphasise very strongly that – while using as a point of departure the elements that French literature gave me – at the same time I have always strived to create a new language, one capable of communicating the African heritage. In other words, for me French was a tool that I wanted to use in developing a new means of expression. I wanted to create an Antillean French, a black French that, whilst still being French, had a black character.*³

Questions of nationhood, belonging and alienation are the subject matter (whether covert or overt) of many of the early works of black European cinema. Where Horace Ove's *Pressure* addresses the dilemma of 'identity' facing a black British youth, Med Hondo's *Soleil O* (France/Mauritania, 1969/70) emphasises the contradictions of the colonised's alienation in the metropolis, where the desire for liberation is sharpened.

As a result of cultural struggles around race and racism in Britain during the 1970s and '80s, the term 'black' has become as much a political definition as a racial one. In the wider European context, however, definitions of 'blackness' are differentiated according to cultural and geographical locations. In Holland, for instance, the term 'migrant' is used to account for practically all non-white residents. Over the years, the struggle for self-definition has been shaped by the coloured experience and the variations in black film-making in Europe reveal its legacies. Even within national boundaries there are important differences which determine film production (France, for example, has contributed a significant level of funding to projects based in Africa, yet its Caribbean territories – such as Martinique – receive substantially lower funds, forcing many film-makers to earn their living in other areas of cultural production). This brief survey highlights some of the variations in state funding of independent black film production in West Germany, France, Holland and Britain.

² Jim Pines, 'The Cultural Context of Black British Cinema', in Mbye B Cham and Claire Andrade-Watkins (eds), *BlackFrames: Critical Perspectives on Black Independent Cinema*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1988, pp 26-36.

³ Interview by René Depestre in Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, London, Monthly Review Press, 1972, p 67.

In West Germany, stations such as NDR (Nord Deutscher Rundfunk, in Hamburg), WDR (West Deutscher Rundfunk in Cologne), and ZDF (Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, Mainz), provide the most fruitful channels through which film-makers can seek co-funding. All of these stations were set up after the Second World War. The first two are part of ARD (Joint Association of Public Corporations for Broadcasting in the Federal Republic of Germany) which established the first national TV channel in the early 1950s. ZDF is the second TV channel, set up after much debate around issues of political and cultural balance. These stations have provided co-production monies for such films as Pape B Seck's *Africa Am Rhein* (West Germany, WDR, 1985), King Ampaw's *KuKuRantumi, The Road to Accra* (West Germany/Ghana, 1983), and most recently Raoul Peck's *Haitian Corner* (West Germany/US, ZDF, 1988) which won the Best Feature Film category at the first Images Caraibes Film Festival in Martinique (1988). Britain's Channel Four and West German TV stations have often engaged in co-production funding. However, it appears that most black film-makers who have received monies from these sources have been trained outside West Germany.

Fountainhead, a black cultural organisation was established in Berlin some nine years ago by black Americans Gayle McKinney and Donald Griffiths. The organisation was founded with a nucleus of seven members working in related arts disciplines to raise money to fund their own projects, most notably the First Cultural Festival in Europe in 1986. Donald Griffiths has commented:

*The funding strategies of most government institutions have been indifferent at best in relation to black cultural activities so we decided to use our skills to earn money which goes into our projects. Although Afro-Germans are obviously a visible presence here they do not receive any education about their other heritage, so this is what Fountainhead tries to promote.*⁴

Institutional funding in Germany largely comes from the Berlin Senate or the Church. For example, the Evangelical Church of Stuttgart gave Fountainhead its first institutional funds.

The group has, over the years, formed a relationship with Polish television which has put co-production monies into a range of films and videos. They have also received funds from Italian governmental and private sources.

One of the major problems encountered by Afro-Germans seeking funding for projects is that their status as first or second generation blacks often denies them access to funds even though their particular concerns are largely absent from television and cinema. Long-term training of black technicians, for example, is practically non-existent with no foreseeable change of direction on the part of various policy making bodies.

FRANCE

In France commercial investment provides a major source of funds for black film-makers because the funding of projects by TV stations is not on a scale comparable to West Germany or Britain – although Canal 7 and Canal Plus have, on occasion, provided co-production monies. State expenditure on film and cinemas is substantial, but France's paternalist attitude toward its former colonies has produced a situation where Caribbean territories still annexed to France and black film-makers in France seem to be 'too close for comfort' for the funding bodies. One of the most celebrated Caribbean films, *Rue Cases Negres* (1985), directed by Martiniquean Euzhan Palcy was made with a combination of funds from the French Ministry of Culture, the Regional Council of Martinique, poet and politician Aimé Césaire, distributor Claude Nedjar and from private donations in Martinique.

Some film-makers, like Elsie Haas (*Zatrap*, Haiti, 1979), work in other media while trying to raise money for film projects. Med Hondo and Julius Amede Laou both came to film-making via the theatre, and strong theatrical overtones are present in Hondo's *West Indies* (France, 1979), shot entirely on a purpose-built 'slave ship' in a community centre in Paris, and Julius Amede Laou's *Mélodie de brumes à Paris* (France, 1985). Safi Faye has worked almost exclusively in

⁴ Donald Griffiths, in conversation with the authors.

television since her 1976 production *Letter from my Village*, while raising funds for her next film, *House of the Spider*, to be produced by Michel Gue, the producer of both Willy Rameau's and Med Hondo's most recent films.

France has a range of post-production facilities which many African and Caribbean film-makers use frequently, because such facilities are often absent in their own countries. Atriascope, set up in 1980 by film editor André D'Aventure, has been significant in providing pre- and post-production facilities primarily for African film-makers. D'Aventure estimates⁵ that such films receive about five per cent of the French budget for cultural funding, with the proviso that the money be spent in France. Atriascope itself has recently moved into production, concentrating on serials and short fiction films.

Distribution has always been a problem for black independent film-makers, but it is noticeably more difficult to find adequate distribution for those films that foreground politics, cultural conflict or historical reassessment. Both *Sarraounia* (Med Hondo, 1987) and *Lien de Parenté* (Willy Rameau, 1986) opened in Paris on the Champs Élysées after having their distribution rights bought up by the same distributor, but both were taken off after only two weeks despite large audiences and favourable reviews. Some independent film-makers prefer, like Haitian Elsie Haas, either to distribute their own work or to stay with small distribution companies such as K-Films who distribute the work of Julius Amede Laou. These distributors, while supporting such films, may not have the resources to permit wide circulation.

HOLLAND

The definition of non-white residents as 'migrants' has produced a situation where cultural provision is largely seen as an act of benevolence by the Dutch authorities. Less than a handful of migrant training organisations exist, and receive funding on a short-term basis. MTV (Migrant Television School) was set up in 1984 with funds from the Department of Social Security/Employment. Although the course offered is supposed to run for three years, MTV must submit applications for renewed funding every twelve to eighteen months. Even after

training, job prospects are grim, though occasionally student productions get bought for Dutch TV, as happened with Surinamese director Guilly Koster's first short film, *Self Portrait* (1986). There is to date no 'migrant' representation within the Dutch National Film School. Although Surinam-born film-maker Pim De La Parra (*Wan Pipel*, Surinam/Holland, 1976) attended film school in Holland, MTV's project leader Peter Schaapman states⁶ that the government demands the majority of students be of Turkish and Moroccan descent with students from the Dutch Antilles thus coming lower down the list. Curacao director, Felix de Rooy trained at the New York University Film School, where he produced his first feature *Desire* (1984). Aruban writer/producer Norman De Palme also studied there. They returned to Holland to establish their production company, Cosmic Illusions, in the mid-1980s – a partnership which has resulted in the award-winning *Almacita de Desolato* (1985), which took the Jury Prize at the first Images Caraïbes Film Festival in Martinique in 1988.

Film-makers Frank Zichem and Gloria Lowe both work regularly for Dutch TV, using this money to help finance their films. Frank Zichem has directed a soap opera series about a Surinamese family living in Holland. Gloria Lowe has produced a variety of documentaries for the Educational TV Service, which receives funds from the State University Education Network. Her drama-documentary, *We're Doing It for the Children/Santa Claus* (1982), concerns the racist assumptions which permeate Dutch culture. The film shows the evoking of Saint Nick's servant, Black Pete, at carnival time; white men 'blackened up', and 'delicacies' such as 'nigger kisses' which are seen as essential to this festivity. No one sees it as racism or is hurt by it, except the black people living in Holland. Municipal dignitaries in black face defend the practice, and a black woman and her white lover argue over the woman's insistence that she will not accompany him to participate in the Saint Nick celebrations with his parents.

⁵ André D'Aventure, in conversation with the authors.

⁶ Peter Schaapman, in conversation with the authors.

Another training body is IM (Information on Migrants), which was set up in the late 1970s specifically to offer migrants training in video. IM receives about two million guilders from government sources each year. The training offered, however, is, in Gloria Lowe's words⁷, not unlike the medium itself – 'fast and furious', with courses only lasting for four to six weeks. This clearly doesn't offer students the chance adequately to explore video technology or build up a body of work which might help secure jobs in the industry, but those who already have some experience can, for a nominal fee, make use of IM's facilities for projects and gain 'hands on' experience.

BRITAIN

Black film-making in Britain has been expanding, though somewhat erratically, since its beginning in the early 1960s with a handful of self-financed shorts by largely self-taught film-makers. In the 1970s and early '80s the British Film Institute's Production Board funded two landmark films – Horace Ove's *Pressure* (1974) and Menelik Shabazz's *Burning an Illusion* (1981). In 1981 also the civil disturbances in Brixton brought institutional responses particularly from the Greater London Council (abolished in 1986). The GLC's cultural policy enabled the allocation of funds to a younger generation of black film-makers trained in a variety of institutions and disciplines. Groups like Sankofa Film and Video Collective, Black Audio Film Collective, Retake Film and Video Collective, and Ceddo Film/Video Workshop also attracted funding from Channel Four television which, in its early years, encouraged diversity and innovation. Production companies such as Bandung, Kuumba, and Azad have also benefited from Channel Four.

Adequate training is still a major obstacle. The National Film and Television School still has less than a handful of black students and most individuals wishing to gain access to equipment and technical knowledge have to rely on short courses organised by film groups and largely funded by regional authorities such as Greater London Arts (GLA). The Arts Council of Great Britain has recently started to provide funds for individual black film-makers. Art schools play an important role, with colleges such as St Martin's

School of Art, London, now addressing the need for multi-cultural curricula and resources. While the funding situation in Britain may seem more hopeful than elsewhere, it is interesting to note that the funding of larger-scale productions remains just as difficult. Horace Ove's *Playing Away* (1986) has been the only major black fiction film to date to realise adequate commercial funding.

Audience building is another area of concern for, as Jim Pines notes, black audiences cannot be conceived of as a homogeneous entity:

*Black film and video practitioners are obliged to think seriously about ways of addressing these different (Black) audiences, and about how to promote different kinds of Black and Third World films generally.*⁸

More research into these and other issues of black European film production still needs to be done. In conclusion, we note two areas which we have not addressed above. There are still too many films by the first generation of black film-makers domiciled in Europe and especially in France which remain neglected. These films are a vital part of the diasporic culture and must be both placed in national film archives and made available for viewing. Eastern Europe, and particularly the Soviet Union, has fallen outside the scope of this survey. Nonetheless, many black film-makers have trained there and others continue to do so. This interrelationship needs to be explored in detail.

This article developed from one written to accompany a season of films by black European film-makers to be screened by Channel Four in Britain in the autumn of 1988.

⁷ Gloria Lowe, in conversation with the authors.

⁸ Jim Pines, *op cit*, p 36.

NOTICE OF THE SEFT ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The Annual General Meeting of the Society for Education in Film and Television will take place in London on Saturday, January 21, 1989.

Nominations are invited for the posts of Chair and Treasurer and for 9 members of the Executive Committee. Names of nominees (together with a brief statement and the names of 1 proposer and 1 seconder) should be received at the SEFT office, 29 Old Compton Street, London W1V 5PL, by November 26, 1988. Nominees, proposers and seconds must all be members of the Society for Education in Film and Television. Membership is through subscription either to *Screen* or *Initiatives*. All motions to be put before the AGM should also be received at the SEFT office by November 26, 1988.

LOCATING THE ASIAN EXPERIENCE

BY PERMINDER DHILLON-KASHYAP

The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary.

– Gabriel Garcia Marquez

The few times an effort has been made to look at the Asian ¹ experience/perspective in film in Britain are in accounts on the popular Bombay Cinema – usually to dismiss it as ‘superbly vulgar entertainment’, or to praise the New Wave cinema, particularly the films of Satyajit Ray, as being in the tradition of Western cinema ² – or in analyses of representations, usually on television ³ of ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ images and stereotyping.

At other times, the Asian perspective is given only cursory mention in general debates on film

and race and in discussions of the black independent film/video sector.⁴ This systematic exclusion by both white and black theorists is not simply because the Asian experience/perspective in film hasn’t been documented. For white theorists the diversities of experiences, perspectives and cultures which this ‘other’ presents pose a problem of ‘assimilation’ into the categories and constructs which they have sought to impose on perspectives they regarded as marginal or as difficult.⁵ Britain is still not perceived, except in lip service, as a society composed of many cultures and races. The dominant model for theorists is that of the centre (white) and the margin (the ‘other’) where the margin has to shift towards the centre, towards

¹ The term Asian is defined as people living in or originating from the Indian sub-continent, now Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri-Lanka. For a discussion of this definition see Sandip Hazareesingh, ‘Racism and Cultural Identity: An Indian Perspective’, *Dragon’s Teeth* 1986, no 24, pp 4–10 and Tariq Modood, ‘“Black” Racial Equality and Asian Identity’, *New Community*, vol XIV, no 3, Spring 1988.

² See the racist pronouncements on Indian cinema as recently as Gerald Kaufman’s ‘Schlockwatch’, *The Listener* April 14, 1988, p 50. See also Jack C Ellis, *A History of Film*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1979, pp 286–91. For a constructive discussion of Indian cinema see Vijay Mishra, ‘Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema’, *Screen* May–August 1985, vol 25 no 3–4, pp 133–46; Rosie Thomas, ‘Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity’, *ibid*, pp 116–31. See also Munni Kabir’s film portrayal of the history of the Bombay Cinema in ‘Movie Mahal’ a serial made by Hyphen Films, 1987 and shown on Channel Four.

³ For a comprehensive account see Preeti Manuel, ‘The Representation of Black People in British Television Drama’,

Independent Broadcasting Authority, 1984. An event was held to discuss the representation of black people in British TV at Cinema City, Norwich, May 13–15, 1988. Cynthia Buckner, ‘“East Enders” – What the Hell are They Doing to the Black Families?’, *The Journal*, pilot issue, August 5–18, 1986; ‘Blacks on the Box’, *New Community*, vol XIII, no 2, Autumn 1986, pp 286–90; Gajendra Verma, ‘Attitudes, Race Relations and Television’ in John Twitchen (ed), *The Black And White Media Book*, Trentham, 1988, pp 123–29; Janice Shinebourne, ‘Damaging Images – Black Silk Ethnic Chic TV Series BBC 2’, *Race Today*, vol 17 no 1, February 1986. See also two recent programmes on the BBC’s Network series dealing with representations of Asian and black people on television (1988).

⁴ Jim Pines, ‘Black Independent Film in Britain: Historical Overview’, in John Twitchen (ed), *op cit*, pp 103–11.

⁵ For a critique of film theory and practice see Robert Cruz, ‘Black Cinemas, Film Theory and Dependent Knowledge’, *Screen*, May–August 1985, vol 26 no 3–4, pp 152–56.

being 'assimilated', in order to be accepted/ included. Sociological and political theorists have sought to pathologise the Asian perspective by excluding it when 'normal' processes are being studied and by including it when the deviant or the 'other' is being studied (note the 'special' needs debate in social policy – or special editions of journals). As Avtar Brah notes, 'This "normalised absence and pathologised presence" is a powerful dynamic in the construction of racist ideologies.'⁶ The colonised were, according to Robert Stam and Louise Spence, 'ridiculed as lacking in culture and history because colonialism, in the name of profit, was destroying the basis of that culture and the memory of that history'.⁷

By confining this 'other', the 'alien', to the Indian subcontinent and to ghettoised slots, the concept of the 'British race' remains whiter than white while making a pretence of including the 'specialness', the 'difference' of the other. Trinh T Minh-Ha argues that:

*Specialness as a soporific soothes, anaesthetizes my sense of justice. . . . Now I am not only given permission to open up and talk, I am also encouraged to express my difference. My audience expects and demands it. Otherwise people would feel as if they have been cheated: we did not come to hear a Third world member speak about the First(?) world, we came to listen to that voice of difference likely to bring us what we can't have. . . .*⁸

Faced with the dilemma of participating in a structure where 'the barrier to real dialogue is thus the terms of the dialogue itself'⁹ and with the desire to furnish our own ideologies, ours 'then (becomes) a journey – a geographical, social and political journey'¹⁰ in order to explode the

myth of the centre and the margin. The written word has a vital role to play here. Nawal el Saadawi argues that:

*Writing is like killing because it takes a lot of courage, the same courage as when you kill, because you are killing ideas, you are killing injustices, you are killing systems that oppress you. Sometimes it is better to kill the outside world and not kill yourself.*¹¹

ASIAN PRESENCE IN BRITAIN

The narrow use of the term 'black' in Britain to refer mainly to those of Afro-Caribbean origin, and the fact that much of the black independent film sector in Britain has engaged in debate with black writers and critics in the US, where black experience is very different, has meant that the Asian perspective in British film culture has tended to be excluded.

Contrary to popular belief that immigration from the Indian sub-continent occurred only after the Second World War, the Asian presence in Britain can be traced back to the eighteenth century.¹² Like other cultural and artistic practices, film-making has been a feature of this history – films made by Asians or incorporating Asian experience go back as far as 1924: that year, Heman Surayi, with Franz Osten, made *Light of Asia*, a British-German co-production with an all-Asian cast. Since then there have been many Asian film-makers working in Britain¹³, mainly in the mainstream, and not necessarily addressing the Asian experience in Britain or targetting their work at Asian audiences. They may even have – consciously or unconsciously – contributed to the West's fascination with the orient; a nostalgic

⁶ Avtar Brah, 'Extended Review', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, vol 9, no 1, 1988, pp 115-21.

⁷ Robert Stam and Louise Spence, 'Colonialism, Racism, and Representation: An Introduction', *Screen* March-April 1983, vol 24 no 2, pp 2-20; reprinted in Bill Nichols (ed), *Movies and Methods*, University of California Press, pp 632-49.

⁸ Trinh T Minh-Ha, 'Difference: A Special Third World Woman Issue', *Feminist Review*, no 25, March 1987, pp 5-22.

⁹ Teshome H Gabriel, 'Colonialism and "Law and Order"

Criticism', *Screen* May-August 1986, vol 27 no 3-4, pp 140-47.

¹⁰ S Grewal et al, *Charting the Journey, writings by black and Third World women*, London, Sheba, 1988.

¹¹ Nawal el Saadawi, quoted in *ibid*.

¹² Rozina Visram, *Ayahs, Lascars and Princes*, London, Pluto, 1986.

¹³ For example, Waris Hussain (*Edward and Mrs Simpson*), Jamil Dehlavi, (*Blood of Hussain*), Ismail Merchant (*Shakespeare Walla*).

reworking of the colonial image to confirm white supremacy.¹⁴ The obsessive fascination with colonial experience has resulted in big budget fantasies like *Gandhi* and *Octopussy*, as well as *The Far Pavilions*, *A Passage to India*, *Jewel in the Crown*, or *Heat and Dust*. These nostalgic tales of the 'Raj' reiterate and intensify the same colonial images – of the 'other', the 'darkie', the 'alien' – which were created and used to justify colonialism, while making a pretence of questioning the morality of imperialism. With the ingredients of soap opera, they distort and misrepresent colonial history by creating white central characters whose stories are the only ones which matter. Thus beguiling the audience, implicit cultural discriminations are presented as 'truths'. Colonial atrocities by the British are then presented as deeds of extreme personalities (policeman Merrick in *The Jewel in the Crown* and Colonel Dyer in *Gandhi*). Liberalism (the white reporter in *Gandhi*, Daphne Manners in *Jewel*) is seen as quite inappropriate in the face of blood-thirsty 'natives' whose actions deny them the right to any sympathy for their fate under colonial rule. These colonial images are constantly reworked.¹⁵

... Works of art, even works of entertainment, do not come into being in a social and political vacuum; and the way they operate in a society cannot be separated from politics, from history. For every text, a context; and the rise of Raj revisionism, exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, is the artistic counterpart to the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain.¹⁶

POPULAR MYTHS

Think of an Asian woman – what comes to mind? Arranged marriages? Domestic violence? Stuck between two cultures?

*What if the popularized story of Identity crisis proves to be only a story and nothing else?*¹⁷

British television has been guilty of perpetuating the myths of Asian cultures. Countless TV dramas, news items, 'documentaries' and magazine programmes¹⁸ have concentrated on the themes of:

the immigrants – images of Asian women and children with an announcement of the numbers of immigrants in Britain, to say that they already pose a threat and that numbers will grow in future.

the problem – countless programmes have concentrated on Asian people as victims; of racist attacks, of the welfare services, of concerted campaigns by white parents against Asian-dominated schools, and so on. The issues have always been framed to project the *affected* as the problem.

the criminal – Asians as drug smugglers and dealers.

arranged marriages – the media are obsessed with this issue. It is used as an instance of 'the primitive' in other cultures.

assimilation – magazine programmes have concentrated on educating Asian women into the 'British' way of life.

liberation of Asian women – through sexual relationships with white men and through western modes of 'culture', while making them victims of patriarchal culture.

By such means, Avtar Brah argues,

*The so-called traditional societies are presented as a polarised opposite to the West's own self-image: traditional societies are ridden with religious belief and social custom while western society is seen to provide its women education, access to financial resources and extensive civil and political rights.*¹⁹

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October* no 28, pp 125-33.

¹⁵ Salman Rushdie, 'The Raj Revival', *The Observer*, April 1984; reprinted in John Twitchen, *op cit*, pp 130-33.

¹⁶ Salman Rushdie, *ibid*.

¹⁷ Trinh T Minh-Ha, *op cit*.

¹⁸ See Paul Gilroy, 'C4 – Bridgehead or Bantustan?', *Screen* July-October 1983, vol 24 no 4-5, pp 130-136. Dramas on British television have included *Mind Your Language*, *It Ain't Half Hot Mum*, *Love Match*, *Plenty Chappati*, *Plenty Chips*, *King of the Ghetto* and *Tandoori Nights*. *Nayi Zindagi*, *Naya Jeevan*, *Gharbar*, *Here and Now*, *Aap Ka Haq*, *Skin*, *Eastern Eye* and *Network East* are some of the magazine programmes television has devised for an Asian audience.

¹⁹ Avtar Brah, *op cit*.

It is not therefore surprising that the debate in the independent sector has concerned itself with representations, of negative and positive stereotypes: but, as Mahmood Jamal points out:

*Being constantly misrepresented in the media can make one unbearably sensitive to issues of stereotyping and lead us into protecting and defending every stain that shows up when we wear our badly washed clothes. . . .*²⁰

This reaction has proved 'an invaluable contribution by alerting us to the hostile distortion and affectionate condescension with which the colonised have been treated in the cinema' but the analysis of this situation has been marred by 'a certain methodological naiveté'.²¹

*Perhaps we have to reflect before we can deflect the forces and patterns which prevent us from gaining a higher vision.*²²

The effect of distorted images has been to deny Asian three-dimensionality in a reduction to 'types', for white society's voyeuristic gaze. The search for 'positive' images has tried to replace that lost three-dimensionality. So topics, such as 'arranged marriages', portray Asians as survivors rather than victims, and Asian experiences, particularly that of Asian women, were the subjects of the early Asian films. They were, to borrow a term from Fernando Solanas in *Hour of the Furnaces* (1968), the work of those who were 'treated as inferiors but not convinced of their inferiority'.

Hamari Rangily Zindagi (Our Colourful Lives) came out of a National Association of Youth Clubs research project. The video and tape-slide exhibition were produced by Amina Patel and Laxmi Jamdagni in 1979. By focusing on discussions with young Asian women about their own experience, racist myths were called into question. The young women's views were for once being heard, rather than being 'read' through popular misconceptions. It was a deliberate decision to produce a tape-slide to allow discussion to take place, as well as guide-notes to be used in conjunction with the screening of the tape-slide and video. Amina Patel and Laxmi Jamdagni's recent film, *Stepping out of Frame* (1987), deals in depth with media stereotypes of Asian women and retells two media

stories. One is of Indian women organising autonomously in India and the other of Jaswinder Kaur, who took the National Health to task by insisting on her right to wear salwar kameez to work.²³

Mirror, Mirror, directed by Yogesh Walia (1980) dealt with the contradictions in a young Asian woman's life. The film takes place while the woman is running herself a bath. Contradictions are explored through the soundtrack where her own, her parents' and her white boyfriend's voices intermingle. The final shot of her rejecting her 'identity' shows her in a sari looking at herself in the mirror and smashing it. The issue of 'arranged marriages' from a woman's point of view was explored in *The Wall*, directed by Faris Karmani (1980/81). This film, shot in Urdu, was never released. H O Nazareth and Horace Ove in *The Garland* (1981) explored the issue of a child in a mixed marriage. Other films have looked at similar situations. *Breaking the Silence* was about Bangladeshi women and was made by the Federation of Bengali Organisations and shown on a 'People to People' slot on Channel Four.

Dealing with dominant representations has recently given way to more innovative subject matter. It has also allowed for experimentation, intervention and opposition to dominant film culture, and to dominant modes of representation of race.²⁴

FEATURES

The first feature film to deal with the Asian experience in Britain was *A Private Enterprise*, in

²⁰ Mahmood Jamal, 'Dirty Linen', *Artrage* no 17, p 40.

²¹ Robert Stam and Louise Spence, op cit.

²² Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap, 'A Wicked Old Woman', *Artrage* no 19, p 47.

²³ See also *The Arranged Marriage* by Jasvinder Phull, 1986 (distributed by Circles); *Shattering Illusions* by Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap, 1987 (not in distribution); *Changing Images* by Munawar Nizam, 1988 (distributed by Open Space).

²⁴ For example the depictions of Afro-Caribbean and Asian communities in *Black Audio*, *Handsworth Songs*, 1987; see also Pratibha Parmar, *Emergence*, 1987 (distributed by Circles).

1975²⁵. It told the story of Shiv, a young graduate from India living in Birmingham and working in a foundry. The film is set in the grim urban wasteland of Birmingham. Through Shiv, we get acquainted with the issues facing arrivals to Britain in search of economic security. Shiv is naive enough to think that he can start a business of his own, manufacturing Indian plastic novelties, when the foundry where he works has a strike. We are shown the limited choices open to him – struggle with his idea of a business and how to raise finance; continue to work in the foundry and be on a picket line fighting for workers' rights and against racism; marry the daughter of his uncle's rich friend and lose his own identity; become a partner in his uncle's sweated-labour factory and get caught in the same circle; or pursue the friendship of a white woman who 'is on a cultural and sexual tour of the third world, bringing temporary relief to parched communities'.²⁶

The film explores Shiv's emotions through his relationship with his uncle and with his friend. For the first time, Asian characters in a film are more than cut-out cardboard pieces. Through them, we get a sense of their experiences. The quick visits to the emotional 'home' of Southall (the visits to the café and cinema) provide a sense of belonging. We are shown the false securities of the Asian rich, where power is only relative. There are also contradictions with the 'other' being accepted as exotic (the guru) and the 'other' as problem (the immigrant). By concentrating on Shiv's point of view, neither he, nor the other characters, are seen as 'victims', even though some situations may demand this. Nor does the film posit any easy answers, for to suggest any solution would have been no solution. The film was well received by the critics, yet it remains speculative as to how *A Private Enterprise* might have been received by the Asian communities if it had been made more accessible by being filmed in one of the South Asian languages.

The next landmark in feature films was Retake's *Majdhar* in 1984. *Majdhar* deals with the experiences of Fauzia, a young Asian woman abandoned by her husband soon after arrival in London from Pakistan. Careful to avoid the racist stereotype of 'an Asian woman scrounging off the Welfare State', it touches on subjects such as the independence of women, sexual relationships between Asian and white people, abortion and

young people's attitudes towards their parents. But such an approach had its own limitations. As Ahmed Jamal from Retake remarked:

We are constantly finding ourselves in a position of reacting, of feeling very strongly about depicting the reality of our experiences and resisting what has been imposed on us. While we find ourselves in this position, it becomes harder to explore our creativity.

Even as the way for more innovative and experimental work has been cleared by independent practitioners, recent years have thrown up different challenges with the success of quasi-'mainstream' television programmes or films like *My Beautiful Laundrette*.²⁷

EVER MORE SOPHISTICATED STEREOTYPES

Film and television continue to use and refine Asian stereotypes. *The King of the Ghetto* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* have both commanded considerable media coverage and relatively large audiences. Strong reactions by the Asian community to such representations of Asian people, perpetuated by Asian writers, have been dismissed as a 'rag bag of uninformed criticism'²⁸. This spontaneous criticism can easily be taken out of context so that the issues which provoked the reaction become defused, enabling the protest to be dismissed as 'reactionary'. The problem with *King of the Ghetto* and *My Beautiful Laundrette* is not that Asian businessmen have been presented as opportunist and corrupt or that homosexuality in the Asian community has been depicted. The issue is that these films are set in the present but still use racist stereotypes as foundation stones to tell a story. Only when such stereotypes have

²⁵ *A Private Enterprise*, script by Dilip Hiro and Peter Smith, directed by Peter Smith, BFI Production Board, 1975.

²⁶ Gavin Millar, *The Listener*, January 30, 1975.

²⁷ *My Beautiful Laundrette*, script by Hanif Kureishi, directed by Stephen Frears, 1985. Farrukh Dhondy, *The King of the Ghetto*, 1986.

²⁸ Farrukh Dhondy at the 'Black People in British TV' event, Cinema City, Norwich, May 1988.

been rejected will each characterisation be able to function as a unit rather than as 'them' (the mass) and 'us' (the characters).

King of the Ghetto depicts local Bangladeshi people as being totally submissive and incapable of organising to solve their own housing problems and thus being at the mercy of the white man, Matthew. The fact that local Bangladeshi people have been organising squats since the 1950s is conveniently ignored.²⁹

So what was the serial about and at whom was it targeted? Was it really about the politicisation of the Bangladeshi community or was it about Matthew's ego and Sadie's dilemmas in being anti-racist? Of course, all these issues can be explored together and in a way that does not simply reduce the Asian characters to those well-known types (the corrupt businessman, the submissive woman, the helpless uneducated men) and without only speaking through the white characters. To do so is important in order to get beyond the 'ghetto' that Asians have been slotted into, important in evaluating the Asian experience in film, and important in making connections with audiences.

The problem with *My Beautiful Laundrette* is not that the film depicts an Asian gay male or that it has trivialised racism by fusing love between a racist white male and an Asian gay, but that it has subtly reworked the stereotypes thereby adding an 'authenticity' to them. By fusing racism and sexuality, the film has created a new victim, the white fascist – a victim of economic circumstances who is being exploited by petty bourgeois Asian businessmen. Consider the opening scene of the film – two white fascists have been thrown out by black heavies on the orders of Salim (Derrick Branche). Instantly, the film attempts to engage the spectator's sympathy towards these fascists. Similarly, in *King of the Ghetto*, one programme opens with Matthew (Tim Roth), 'a skinhead', being chased by Asian youths. Through whose eyes are we perceiving the reality of the lives of the Asians in such circumstances?

Laundrette seems to be less interested in exploring issues of class, corruption or sexuality and more in sensationalising them in order to win a white audience by saying 'everything they thought about us but were afraid to say'.³⁰ Making Tania (Rita Wolf) bare her breasts does not, *pace* Hanif Kureishi, give 'Rita a chance to be liberated for a few moments'³¹. Because *My*

Beautiful Laundrette seems to operate predominantly as a white male fantasy, Tania must bare her breasts to the audience's voyeuristic gaze.³² Similarly, *King of the Ghetto* slots the roles of Asian women into the 'victim' and the 'passive' mould and only allows them a measure of 'freedom' through a white male or through sexual exploitation by men.

LOCATION

Some independent film-makers are trying to 'break away from the reliance on stereotyping. They are trying to gain acknowledgement of an Asian perspective in the independent sector, contending with racism, struggling to make connections with audiences; dealing with aspects of being black and being British, about not being forced to make compromises. Azad Productions and Retake Film and Video Collective in particular have taken up such issues. Specialising in making television programmes about South Asia and about people from South Asia settled in Britain, Azad have made a number of documentaries as well as a series of Asian magazine programmes for Channel Four (*Sunday East*, October 19, 1986 to May 31, 1987). Their first documentary dealt with Asian women survivors of domestic violence. Another programme, 'A Fearful Silence', was made in 1985 and broadcast on Channel Four in August 1986. It showed women's everyday struggle and their determination to organise around the issue of domestic violence. Other productions have covered a variety of issues from the sub-continent.³³ Similarly, Retake have made

²⁹ See Fatima Salaria's critique of *The King of the Ghetto* in *Artrage* no 17.

³⁰ Mahmood Jamal, *op cit*.

³¹ Interview in *Buzz*, 1986.

³² Rita Wolf, 'Beyond the Laundrette', *The Guardian* February 14, 1987. For an alternative reading, see Pratibha Parmar's interview with Hanif Kureishi in *Marxism Today*, February 1988.

³³ Other films by Azad Productions include: *State of Limbo* about political exiles living in Britain (shown on BBC 2, 'Open Space', August 11, 1986); *Baluchistan - The Gathering Storm*, 1986; *A Corner of a Foreign Field*, 1986; *Quawaali - Sabri Brothers*, 1987; *Faiz - A Poet in Troubled Times*, 1987; *Poetry of Defiance - Habib Jahlib*, 1988.



Hotel London: tackling homelessness

documentaries about the elderly, 'An Environment of Dignity', and about deportations, 'Sanctuary Challenge'. Their recent film on the homeless in London, 'Hotel London', is in drama rather than documentary form.

Recent work like Suj Ahmed's *An East End Story* (1986), Ruhul Amin's *A Kind of English*, Suri Krishnanama's *Mohammed's Daughter* (nominated for BAFTA's Best Short Film Award, 1987), Retake's *Hotel London* and Star Production's forthcoming *Tangled Web* show an encouraging proliferation in style and content. The cross-over between mainstream current affairs programmes dealing with Asian issues and Bandung Productions dealing with 'mainstream' issues add to the number of independent practitioners concerning themselves with contemporary, innovative and experimental work. The recent depiction of the Bombay cinema and Pakistani film industry by Hyphen Films has made it more possible to use as models seasoned Indian directors and for the latter to explore more contemporary work.

There are groups and individuals who are exploring productions in languages other than English, co-productions between film-makers in Britain and India, looking at distribution and using current networks (for example, the community/commercial networks which

distribute popular Bombay films) to make work from the independent sector accessible to different sections of the community, creating an Asian women's space within film and a forum for critical debate.³⁴ Obviously, the sector comprises disparate groups, individuals and practices whose expressions and positions are by no means informed by a unified political ideology. At least a change has taken place to supersede distinctions between 'centre' and 'margin'. Boundaries are being forced open and new practices become possible.

*The role of being active subserves the reactive role. Because you react first, you don't act upon something. Part of the reason is that you are pushed into reacting. But you have to stop this. You have to locate yourself. If you are constantly reacting, you are not locating yourself. You are getting bounced about.*³⁵

My grateful thanks to the following for making this article possible: Arjun Kashyap, Shahina Fazal, Mahmood Jamal, Ferdous Aly, Avtar Brah, Amina Patel, Retake Film and Video Collective.

³⁴ For details of this forum, contact Retake Film and Video Collective, 25 Bayham Street, London NW1.

³⁵ Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap, 'An interview with Shyam Benegal', *Bazaar*, September 1988.

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CRETEIL 1988: TEN YEARS ON

BY GINETTE VINCENDEAU

This year's Créteil International Women's Film Festival (March 12-20)¹ appropriately celebrated its tenth anniversary with Agnès Varda, one of the few prominent French women directors who is also an avowed feminist. Varda presided over the opening and closing evenings with her two new features, respectively *Jane B, par Agnès V*, (a portrait of Jane Birkin) and *Kung Fu Master*, about a forty-year old woman (Birkin, who suggested the story) falling in love with a fourteen-year old boy played by Varda's own son. Birkin's presence by Varda's side marked the festival's opting for show-biz glamour for the celebrations. The evening after the opening ceremony, Birkin, now a ubiquitous star on French media, could be seen on television giggling her way through the presentation of the *Césars*, the French film Oscars.

That glamour was carried through to the festival poster (which served as a cover for this year's catalogue), an image taken from the festival's video, also specially produced for the tenth anniversary. On a cobbled river bank, a girl dressed in a tutu can be seen holding a small camera, aimed at a beautiful woman clad in black, who is smiling ecstatically under spotlights, while an equally beautiful male model sits reading a newspaper (*Libération*, of course). In its combination of 1980s 'cool fun' with New Wave nostalgia – in the woman's clothes and the stylish use of black and white – the image is a good summary of modish film aesthetics in France today; it is also an indication, as was the presence

of Delacorta, author of *Diva*, on the jury, of how desperately the festival needs to fit into this climate for its survival, while still being dedicated to left cultural intervention and women's expression. I have already talked at length in *Screen* about the problematic place of the Créteil festival within the context of contemporary French culture, and in particular the status of feminism and the present trends in film theory and criticism². The problems raised by this year's event were a continuation of those outlined in the previous articles and could be summarised as two sets of contradictions, to do with Créteil as a film festival on the one hand and as a women's event on the other.

In their press conference the festival organisers Jackie Buet and Elisabeth Tréhard recalled that their primary aim had always been professional: to help women directors improve their standing within the film industry. Although a modest degree of success has been achieved over the ten years, with the distribution of a few foreign features as a result of Créteil screenings or prizes, their initial objective has not been realised on the French scene. There, on the contrary, an

¹ *Films de Femmes*, Festival International de Créteil et du Val-de-Marne, Maison des Arts, 94000-Créteil, France. Créteil (a suburb of Paris) and the Val-de-Marne (the district) are the main grant-giving bodies.

² See *Screen* May-August 1986, vol 27 no 3-4 and *Screen* Autumn 1987, vol 28 no 4.

association with the festival might be regarded as detrimental to a film-maker's image. Despite efforts to make the festival increasingly trade-oriented (professional press service, extensive pre-festival screenings, film market, etc) Créteil is still much more successful as a *cultural* event, with the paradoxical result that some of the festival's following is antagonised by its 'business' aspect, while the trade still stays away.

The second contradictory aspect of Créteil has to do with its audience. Créteil's efforts to reach a wider and younger audience have seemed to bear fruit, with a record attendance of thirty thousand, matched by an increased number of films (about one hundred, including more than sixty features) and venues, which this year included the prestigious Cinémathèque Française in Paris. The programme, especially the features, reflected the choice of mainstream 'art' narrative (including a large number of European films), destined to appeal to a wide audience. However, growing discontent was expressed, particularly by foreign participants, at the almost total absence of avant-garde, experimental, or video work – a perennial issue³. Similarly, the participation and part sponsorship of the monthly *Marie-Claire*, a glossy women's magazine with sociological features on 'women's issues', but otherwise of dubious feminist standing, was a debatable new venture. Another new venture, which consisted in opening the festival to a limited number of films made by men, where this was dictated by thematic and historical constraints, was also controversial. In the event, however, that decision seemed justified by the theme in question, the representation of women in Arab cinema, which included films from Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia, all countries where the number of films made by women so far is tiny.

There were exceptions to the classic realist aesthetics of most of the features in the competition; for instance, Ann Hui's Hong Kong Chinese epic, *The Romance of Book and Sword*. On the whole, however, most features concentrated on personal relationships. First, heterosexual couples, as in Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale* (Hong Kong); Doris Dorrie's *Paradies* (West Germany); and Kathe Kratz's *Marlene: Der Amerikanische Traum* (Austria), and secondly homosexual ones; Donna Deitch's

Desert Hearts, previously unavailable in France, and *Quest for Love* by Helena Nogueira. This very contentious film was booed during screenings; it uses South Africa as an aesthetic background, both visual and narrative, to a love story between two white women.

In this context, and also against the background of contemporary French films⁴ – by women or men – which almost entirely retreat into the personal or the aesthetic, Lezli-An Barrett's *Business as Usual* stood out as a narrative film dealing with a social issue. It received an enthusiastic response, as well as the Jury's main prize. The same week, French papers were singing the praises of *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (directed by Stephen Frears) for precisely the same reasons. This is quite an interesting change. From a position of diffidence, if not hostility, towards feature films dealing with sociological concerns, a growing number of French critics seem to have come round to praising them as diametrically opposed to the narcissistic 'postmodern' genre reworkings of Leos Carax (*Boy Meets Girl* and *The Night is Young*), or the works of Beneix, Besson, and Niermans. Admittedly, *Sammy and Rosie* and *Business as Usual* are 'foreign' and thus safe, but recent successful French releases such as *La Vie est un long fleuve tranquille* by Etienne Chatiliez (a satirical comedy about class), or *La Comédie du travail* by Luc Moullet (about unemployment), may indicate the beginning of an important shift in film-makers' and critics' values.

Among the Créteil features in the competition, two works seemed to me of outstanding interest. Gillian Armstrong's *High Tide*, featuring Judy Davis, combines the exploration of mother-daughter relationships with a strong sense of place. A strange beach-side Australian caravan site becomes the stage for a series of confrontations between three generations of women, whose outcome remains unpredictable until the end. It is a feminist story which is neither didactic nor morose. The second, perhaps more remarkable to us in western Europe, was

³ There are plans for staging a women's video festival at the Centre Simone de Beauvoir.

⁴ As usual, new French films were absent from the competition, which excludes films already distributed in France before the festival.

the Russian Lana Gogoberidze's *Krougovorot* ('The Whirlpool'). Gogoberidze has been making films since the late 1950s, teaches film-making at the University of Tbilisi, and is the founder of the KIWI, an international association of women film-makers created last year, and which was having its first meeting in Créteil at the time of the festival (the next meeting will probably take place at Créteil in the spring of 1989).

The narrative of *Krougovorot* is mosaic-like, almost defying description, but roughly speaking it deals with the relationship between two middle-aged women, one of whom adopts a young girl. The film is shot on the intimist-realist register, concerned with gestures and faces, brief meetings, fleeting moments. This may sound like the worst of 'European art cinema', but in fact what differentiates the film from this tradition is the humour, which relates it to the Central European cinema of the 1960s, and the strong anchoring in everyday life and class differences in today's Tbilisi.

Gogoberidze was not the only director from the USSR represented at Créteil; undoubtedly the most striking presence in the festival this year was Kira Muratova, who was given a full retrospective. Like Gogoberidze, Muratova is a graduate of the Moscow film school (both were pupils of Sergei Gerasimov in the late 1950s) and has been working in film since the early 1960s. Muratova continues the series of 'suppressed' women directors, both in Russia and in the west. At home, she has made only six features since 1964, all of them strongly criticised, censored and in some cases altered, by the Russian authorities. Only now under Gorbachev's reforms is she becoming better known. Her latest film *Peremena Outchasti*, based on Somerset Maugham's *The Letter*, was scheduled to be shown at Cannes this year. In the event, legal entanglements with the Somerset Maugham estate prevented its being shown. *Sredi Serykh Kamnei* ('Amidst the Grey Stones', 1983) was screened at Cannes in the section entitled 'Un certain regard'. Her two most successful features so far, *Korotkie Vstrechi* ('Brief Encounters', 1967) and *Dolgie Provody* ('Long Farewells', 1971) were shown at the Locarno film festival last summer, for the first time. Like Gogoberidze, despite a solid grounding in socialist realism that is still in evidence in her first feature – *Nach Tchestny Khleb* ('Our Honest Bread'), shot with her

husband Muratov in 1964 – Muratova's approach to narrative is oblique and non-linear, a collage of small vignettes exploring ideological contradictions in Soviet society and class differences – as for instance between the two main women characters of *Korotkie Vstrechi*: a government official in charge of water supplies, played by Muratova herself, and a young peasant girl.

As might be expected, Muratova was very reticent about political positions in the few interviews she gave, stressing individuality and artistic concerns above all. Nevertheless her films, technically brilliant, are fascinating precisely because the individualistic concerns of art cinema are traversed by social and political awareness. The same could be said of Larissa Cheptiko's *Kryl'ja* ('The Wings'), presented in a new section of the festival, 'enthusiasms and discoveries'. It is about a middle-aged woman who was a star aviatrix during the war, and is now – 1966, when the film was made – working as a school head and municipal officer. As in Muratova's *Dolgie Provody*, the problems and concerns of a mature woman, and the conflictual relationship with growing children in particular, are explored against a background of absent or ineffectual male figures; the two films share the same scriptwriter, Natalia Riazantseva.

This same section contained some real coups in terms of archival discoveries. Alongside the relatively well-known *Babi Ryanskye* ('The Women of Ryazan', 1927) by Olga Preobrazhenskaya, using dynamic montage to depict a melodrama of patriarchal oppression, and *Hara Kiri* by Marie-Louise Iribe (1928), was the extraordinary *Rwanyje Baschmaki* ('The Torn shoes', 1933), an anti-nazi propaganda film set in Hamburg and using a cast composed almost entirely of children. The film was directed by Margarita Barskaya who, like Preobrazhenskaya, was an actress in 1920s Soviet films before turning to direction. A revelation was Rose Lacau-Pansini's *Le Sang des Finoël* ('Finoël's Blood', 1922), which, like so many French films of the 1920s, features an orphan. In moving between two father figures, the heroine also shifts the film from classic bourgeois melodrama in the city to rural idyll in the south of France, where the use of real location and extras recalls Renoir's *Toni*, also shot in Provence a few years later. Lacau-Pansini's few films – six in the present



An archival coup: *Le Sang des Finoël*

reckoning – have previously been attributed to male directors of the period, in particular Georges Monca with whom she did some work. Details of her flamboyant personal history and career – she married a rich Italian who built her a studio near Nice – were unearthed by meticulous historical research in Orthez, a small town in the western Pyrenees, where she was born. If *Le Sang des Finoël* is anything to go by, one can look forward to her other films as missing pieces of a period of French film history which is only now being explored.⁵

The shorts and documentaries sections contained so many films, with such varied themes and stylistic approaches, that it is almost impossible to isolate significant trends. As usual, the shorts section was numerically unbalanced in favour of French films; this is the festival's way of compensating for the absence of French features. Many were purely aesthetic exercises, although Maryline Canto's *Les Nouilles* ('Noodles'), which received a prize at Créteil as well as in the Brest short film festival, marks a departure towards class observation. The strong British presence this year consisted entirely of animation films: Alison de Vere's remarkable *The Black Dog* (which was awarded a prize at the Annecy

animation festival this year), the *Blind Justice* series already screened in Britain by Channel Four, and the hilarious *Girls Night Out* by Joanna Quinn. It is worth mentioning that there were other British animation films by women (particularly Joan Ashworth's *The Web*, Maya Brandt's *What's Cooking?*, and Vera Neubauer's *The Mummy's Curse*) which did not make Créteil's final selection for reasons of space.

The main theme of documentaries this year was political and racial. Two films concentrated on South Africa: Yolande Zaubermaier's *Classified People* and Betty Wolpert's *Mama I'm Crying* (the reason why several other British documentaries on South Africa did not figure in the final selection either, which was a pity since a larger thematic comparison would have been illuminating). The selection was dominated by two films: Mira Hamermesh's *Talking to the Enemy*, awarded the main prize for documentary (this was the British year at Créteil), which documents a difficult and at times moving

⁵ Apart from works on a few individual directors such as Marcel L'Herbier and Germaine Dulac, the only substantial work on the period is Richard Abel's *French Cinema, The First Wave*, Princeton University Press, 1985.

confrontation between a young Palestinian woman journalist living in New York and an older male Israeli journalist. The other, more controversial, documentary, also set in the Middle East, was the North American *Beirut: The Last Home Movie* by Jennifer Fox, which depicts the reunion of a *grand-bourgeois* Lebanese family in their palace, which is now in the middle of the city's most dangerous zone. The most controversial aspect of the film was also its most interesting idea: the concentration on such an unusual side of the Lebanese conflict, and the aesthetic focus on a ravishing house and beautiful and articulate people.

Although each year is a battle to renew existing funding sources, and find new ones, Créteil's good fortune is to exist in a country which, unlike

Britain, has a cultural policy, regardless of the party in power. The festival's continued existence after ten years is a tribute to Buet and Tréhard's tenacity and hard work, but also to the French recognition of the importance of culture. However, France is also one of the most patriarchal countries in the west, culturally speaking. The festival this year took place during the intense election campaign, in which, for example, the Socialist party video, 'summarising' two hundred years of French history in eight hundred fast-edited stills, included the bare-breasted Emmanuelle (*the Emmanuelle*) as one of these 'crucial' images, between Napoleon and Mitterrand. Créteil's occasional ideological blunders have to be seen in this context.

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